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Lucky Shot

HAROLD COLE



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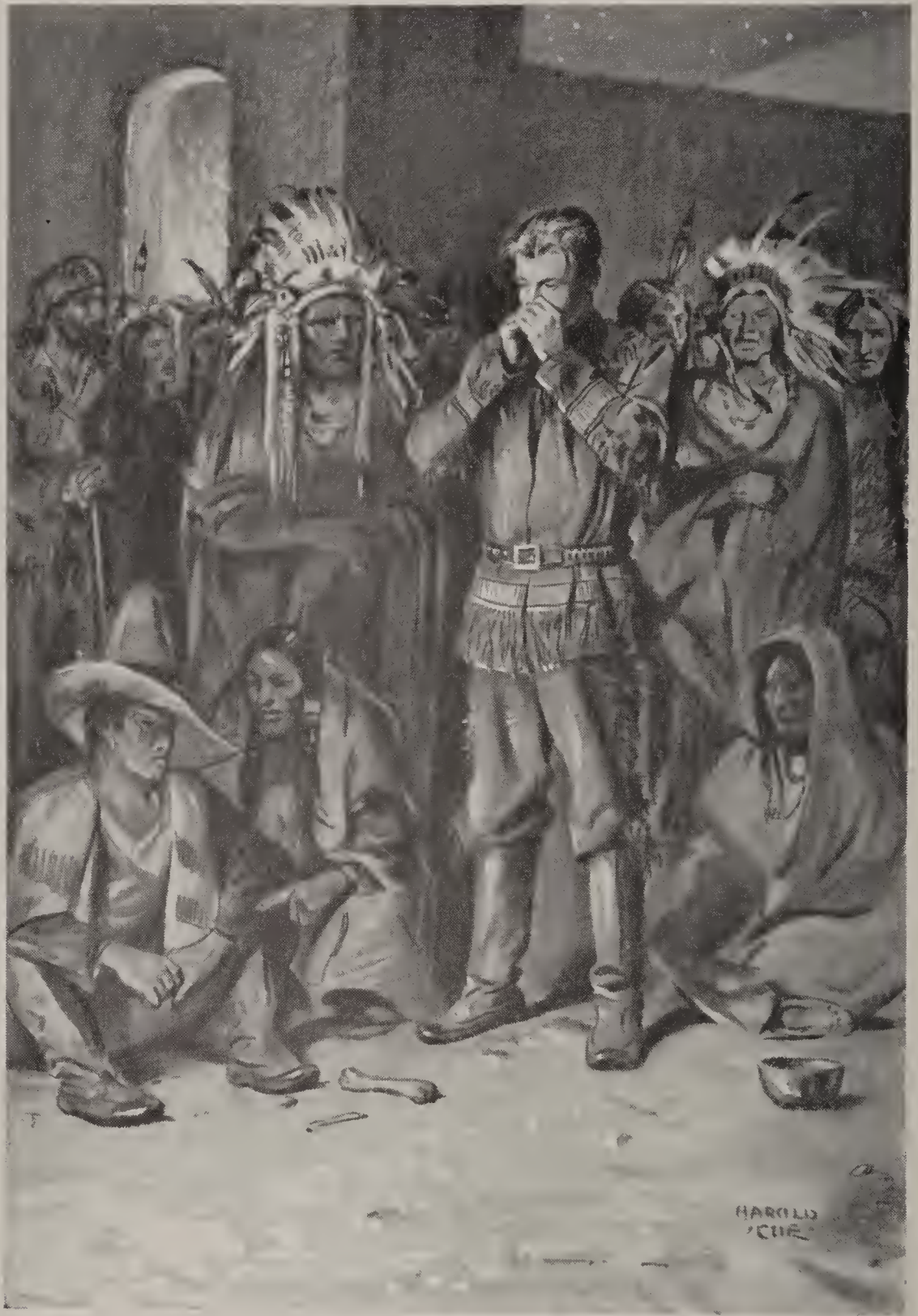
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LUCKY SHOT

A STORY OF BENT'S FORT



HE PUT THE HARMONICA TO HIS LIPS.—Page 224

LUCKY SHOT

A Story of Bent's Fort

By
LOUISE PLATT HAUCK

ILLUSTRATED BY
HAROLD CUE



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LUCKY SHOT

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To
My son,
For whom this story was written

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Dr. Leroy R. Hafen, Historian and Curator of the Colorado Historical Museum, for the generous aid given the author in the research work connected with this book.

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LUCKY SHOT

CHAPTER ONE

“It wasn’t the boy’s fault,” Brad’s father said crisply. “It was merely a piece of bad luck that his bullet should have struck the elk at the same moment Man Haw Ka’s arrow did.”

“Very bad luck,” agreed Squire Medbury drily. “I have the particulars from Man Che Ning, the young brave’s father. It seems that Man Haw Ka had gone out with a party of his friends to exhibit his skill with the bow and arrow. They sighted this elk—and a big fellow he was, too! and the Indian drew on him. His arrow struck the animal in the neck and it dropped, but not, it seems, from Man Haw Ka’s shot. Brad——”

“I was hiding in the underbrush,” Brad Hundley put in for himself, “and wasn’t paying attention to anything but the elk. My

bullet caught him right between the eyes." Despite the gravity of the situation, he could not keep the pride from his voice. It had been a splendid shot for a boy of sixteen.

The little group of four men had gathered in the office of lawyer Hundley, Brad's father. They had come to confer upon the hostility exhibited toward the town by the Sac and Fox Indians living across the river from St. Joseph, in what was then known as Nebraska Territory but which later was to become the State of Kansas.

"It's a most unfortunate time for such a thing to occur," Elder Reeves sighed. "With the Platte Purchase treaty so lately signed and the eyes of the Government turned on us to see how the experiment will work out, it's particularly unfortunate that we should have trouble with the Indians now."

"Oh, come! You can hardly call it trouble," Mr. Hundley said impatiently. "The young chief and his friends are making a nuisance of themselves with their stray arrows——"

“ *Stray* arrows, man! Do you realize that last night my hat was pierced by one of them! ”

The little company hid their several smiles. Jonas Moore was not notable for his courage.

“ Man Haw Ka and his friends don’t matter a great deal.” It was Squire Medbury who spoke again. “ They’ll skirmish about the outskirts of the town for a while and then forget the whole matter. It’s the older men—those who are beginning to realize what confinement to the reservations means.”

“ Confinement! ” Hundley snorted. “ By the terms of our agreement, the Indians are not to be allowed on this side of the river without a pass from the reservation agent. But do they wait for it? No, they swarm across exactly as they always did! The very fact that Man Che Ning came here this morning to complain——”

“ Not complain, neighbor—to take counsel with me and try to find some way out of this difficulty.”

“ No trouble about that.” Hundley’s

voice was distinctly snappish. He considered the whole affair too trivial to have attracted so much attention from the village elders. "I'll write to the agent and tell him to keep his pesky redskins at home—especially Man Che Ning and his rascally son. Brad has as much right to hunt across the river as the Indians have, and if he is a better shot than one of their precious young chiefs, so much the better for Brad, that's all."

"So much the worse for Brad, you mean," Squire Medbury said gravely.

Brad and his father looked at him with sudden attention. The Squire was not given to overestimating a danger. The seriousness of his manner now was not to be taken lightly.

"What d'you mean, Squire? Out with it, man!"

"I mean that Brad's unlucky shot is likely to be made the excuse for an uprising at the reservation."

"Squire, surely not!"

“Just that, Hundley. At first the Indians were greatly pleased at the bargain they thought they had made in the Platte Purchase, but now they are beginning to understand not only the curtailment of their liberty, but the loss of their lands. They are in an ugly mood, and will welcome anything that gives them a chance to display their rage toward the white man.”

“And you think . . . Brad is in danger?”

“Not only Brad, but your entire family; perhaps the whole town. The reservation agent is not a particularly forceful man, and—he is only *one* man. If the Sacs chose to force their way past the guards and go on the warpath, there would be little or nothing to prevent them.”

There was silence in the little room. St. Joseph, thanks to the wise and diplomatic treatment of the Indians by the town's founder, Joseph Robidoux, had suffered none of the attacks common to other villages in the territory. But every man in the group

knew that to confine the restless Sac and Foxes and their more quarrelsome brothers, the Iowas, to a limited area was an experiment which might easily result in disaster. The town council had kept a wary eye to westward for the last two years.

“What would you advise?” Hundley asked, after a period of troubled musing.

“Send Brad away for a time.” The answer came so promptly that Hundley saw it had been prepared beforehand. “If I can tell Man Che Ning that he has gone, it will remove the open cause of the Sacs’ unrest. If they break out of bounds after that, it will be the Government’s affair to punish them. Our skirts will be clear, at any rate.”

The lawyer’s astute mind recognized the soundness of this reasoning. Officials at Washington had warned all white dwellers along the border to do nothing to provoke Indian hostility. Just such an incident as Brad’s superior marksmanship in the case of the disputed elk had more than once proved

a match to set off a ton of Indian dynamite with disastrous results.

Moreover, there was the boy's own safety to be considered. Brad was an adventurous lad, strong and tall for his years. For a week, perhaps for a month, his father's orders might keep him within the limits of the little village; but sooner or later he would rebel, or forget, and then—Hundley shuddered as he recalled incidents of redskin brutality which had come within his knowledge.

He looked at his son. Brad's gray eyes were flashing, his young mouth was set sternly. The injustice of the situation had aroused all his youthful anger. He had done nothing wrong: merely gone hunting, as he had gone some score of times before, across the river, and by a skilful shot had brought down a magnificent elk. He couldn't help it, he told himself fiercely, if that copper-colored Man Haw Ka happened to aim at the same time and did no better than to prick the animal's shoulder with one of his arrows.

“I suppose I'm to be sent away like a

naughty child?" he inquired resentfully. "Packed down to St. Louis for the winter, just when the hunting season opens, too. Father, I——"

"Not St. Louis," his father interrupted. "I've a better plan for you than that." The older man's face had cleared in the last few minutes. "Wait till you hear it, Brad. I've a notion you'll consider this affair a stroke of good fortune after all."

The four men looked at him inquiringly, but Hundley did not satisfy their curiosity. Though he had agreed with their verdict of temporary banishment of his son, the father's heart was hot with wrath at the necessity for it. He would not take his neighbors, good friends though he knew they were proving themselves to be, into his confidence—at least, not just at once.

Squire Medbury rose and held out his hand, a pleasant smile on his weatherbeaten face.

"Good day to you, Hundley! I'm glad you see the wisdom of the course we suggest.

Good-by, Brad! Don't think we're blaming you for all this, my boy! On the contrary we are proud of your skill with your gun, and only sorry that circumstances have turned what should have been a cause for congratulation into an embarrassing situation."

Soon father and son were alone in the office, the lawyer looking a trifle ashamed of his resentment of the other's kindly advice: advice which was wise, as well as kindly.

"He means well—they all mean well," he told Brad. "But somehow it riles me that all the ferment across the river should crystallize around this one trivial incident of yours. However——" He straightened his shoulders and threw back his head as though visibly dismissing the subject. "Now, Brad, cheer up! A fine solution of this problem suddenly came to me a few minutes ago. You know your Uncle Ned——"

The boy's expression of injured dignity underwent a rapid change. His eyes were eager, the sternly set lips curved into a smile.

“ I should say I do know Uncle Ned! Oh, father, you don’t mean——”

Hundley nodded and smiled.

“ Ned will be in Independence soon—ought to be there now, as a matter of fact. He wrote that he was not going back on the regular trip to the Fort, but would return with a Captain Blunt, who is going to Santa Fe. If we can induce Ned to take you back with him—William Bent is a good friend of mine and he’ll make you welcome at his fort, I have no doubt. A year’s experience——”

“ A year? Will you really let me stay a year? ”

“ There won’t be any ‘ letting ’ about it,” Hundley said ruefully. “ Once you reach Bent’s Fort, there’ll be no opportunity to return before next summer. It’s hard on us all, my boy, but it seems best.”

Brad was speechless with excitement and delight.

Ned Hundley, who was but ten years older than himself, was a hero in his nephew’s eyes. He had run away from home when he was

fourteen, joined the Bents, those adventurous brothers who were rapidly setting the imprint of their name and power on the trackless West, and the St. Vrain, in their scouting expeditions. Ned was now one of Bent's assistants in the marvelous Fort which was the talk of the trapper country.

Brad had hung breathlessly on such tales of the Fort as he could extract from the rather laconic young man who had visited them twice in the last three years. Brad knew the plan of the Fort by heart, knew how many hunters were necessary to supply the place with meat, knew of the great brass cannon which stood at the gates by day and was brought inside the Fort at sundown.

There was a young man down there, a friend of Uncle Ned's, of whom Brad had heard a good deal. Kit Carson his name was, and Ned Hundley was never weary of telling of his exploits. If Brad spent a year—or at least the greater part of a year—at Bent's Fort, he would undoubtedly see Carson himself, a prospect so glorious that he

heaped silent though none the less fervent blessings upon the unlucky shot which had precipitated the Indian trouble.

He was soon to discover, however, that his mother did not receive the plan of her son's exile with the same warm approval given it by Brad himself. She grew very pale as she listened to her husband's careful explanation of the boy's danger and his innocent involvement of the town. But she agreed with them both that Brad's immediate removal from the village was not only desirable but actually necessary, and somewhat reluctantly she gave her consent to the expedition to Bent's Fort.

"I know Ned will take good care of him," she said anxiously to her husband. "And a fort ought to be a safe place, if any place is. But the long journey down there, James! Won't Brad be in danger every mile of the way?"

"Danger? Not a bit of it," was the reassuring reply. "Ned is going down with a train of fifty-two wagons—far too large for any Indians to dare attack. Couldn't

be a better opportunity for the boy!" He spoke the more emphatically for the reason that his own doubts had begun to stir. The Santa Fe Trail had been the scene of many a tragedy. Many a train of trappers and traders had been set upon and murdered for the wares they carried beneath their wagon tops. And there was the new and less protected trail which lay between Bent's Fort and the old Santa Fe Trail! Brad's father had to remind himself that his brother was a seasoned Indian fighter and made the journey up to Missouri every year in safety.

Brad's young brother and sister were filled with admiring awe. Brad became at once to them a person of extreme importance: a boy who had stirred the Indians up to such an extent that he had to be sent away so that peace could be kept along the border!

They called out parting requests as they stood beside the horse block two mornings later, watching Brad mount his black horse, Greased Lightning, and their father climb more deliberately into his own saddle. Mr.

Hundley was going as far as Independence with Brad to arrange with his brother for the trip to the Fort.

“Bring me back a Mexican dolly,” pleaded little Ruth.

“Bring *me* a Mexican knife!” small Jim roared.

“Brad, take care of yourself,” Mrs. Hundley whispered, her arms about her tall son’s neck as he leaned from his saddle to kiss her.

“Come, Brad, we’ve two hard days’ riding ahead of us and we’d best be starting,” his father called impatiently. The parting was hard for his wife, he knew, and he felt that the briefer it could be made, the better.

Brad wheeled his horse, snatched off his wide-brimmed hat to wave it at the little group around the horse block and then trotted gaily out of the town which had been his home for sixteen years.

CHAPTER TWO

“ So you think you’d like to travel down to the Fort with me, eh, Brad? ” Ned Hundley inquired. He was standing before his own wagon in the long train about to depart from the outskirts of Independence. Brad and his father had been caught in a storm and their journey delayed by the deep mud of the roads so that they had reached Captain Blunt’s caravan only an hour or two before the actual start. James Hundley had placed the situation regarding Brad before his brother in a few concise words. Without answering, Ned had turned to put a question to his nephew.

“ Yes, Uncle Ned,” came the decorous answer.

His relative grinned derisively in reply.

“ Let’s drop the uncle part of it right

here," he suggested. "I don't feel elderly and dignified enough to be thus addressed by a strapping young fellow an inch or two taller than I am myself. Anyway, we are not much on titles down at the Fort."

Brad returned his infectious grin. As he and his father neared Independence he had been beset by doubts of his own good luck. Suppose the train had already gone! His uncle's letter—a letter which had brought great disappointment to the family at St. Joseph because it told of Ned's inability to visit them on this trip—had mentioned the fifth of October as the starting date, and this was certainly the fifth. Yet the Captain might have changed his mind and gone the day before. In that case, he reflected, he might easily overtake the train, traveling as he did on horseback, and the train proceeding with necessary slowness.

Or, supposing Uncle Ned would say there was no room for him at the Fort! It was a crowded place, by all accounts, and Brad really had no legitimate business there. Per-

haps visitors—and uninvited visitors at that—were not made welcome within those adobe walls.

But the train had not gone, and Ned Hundley was not only willing but apparently delighted to have Brad go along.

“What else will he need in the way of an outfit?” his father was hurriedly inquiring. “There isn’t much time, but he could get a few things in the stores here and then ride on and overtake you. I don’t suppose you make very good time with these wagons.”

“Fifteen miles a day, if all goes well. Ten, eight, sometimes not more than five, if we strike mud. As to an outfit—what did you bring along?” he demanded of Brad, glancing at the well-filled saddlebags Greased Lightning carried so easily.

“Three changes of underwear, another suit, pair of boots, powder and shot for his gun,” James Hundley answered for him. “Some knicknacks in the way of soap and towels that his mother insisted on. A Bible. A hundred dollars in gold. Some extra fine

tobacco as a present to William Bent. A hunting-knife——”

“Great snakes!” the young uncle exclaimed admiringly. “You could go around the Horn with that get-up. No need to buy him anything more, Jim. If he runs short, there are the stores at the Fort, you know.”

“Stores? But they carry nothing but beads and flummery for the Indians, I take it! ’Way down there, six hundred miles from civilization——”

“Man, we’ve got our own civilization! The Fort is a little city within its own walls. Why, we’ve even got a billiard table,” he added, enjoying the look of amazement which spread over his brother’s face. “All the comforts of home at the crossroads of the desert.”

Just how wild and desolate that desert was, he forebore to say. He saw that Brad’s father was troubled at letting the boy go so far from home, and he set himself good-naturedly to reassure his brother.

It proved, however, that there was little

time for either reassurance or information. The command to get under way had been given, and the big wagons were falling ponderously into place in the long train. The three Hundleys exchanged handclasps, Brad reined Greased Lightning into place alongside Ned's wagon, and the start to Bent's Fort had been begun.

The wagons, Brad learned that first day, were not the Conestogas, which were to come in later years, but Murphy wagons, made in St. Louis, and used extensively on the Santa Fe Trail. They had a maximum capacity of five tons, and it required six teams of mules or six yoke of oxen to draw them.

Behind the wagons came the "cavvy," or herd of horses for use when the company reached its destination. The cavvy was always put in charge of a "greenhorn," and arduous indeed was the task assigned to the young fellow.

Brad made the acquaintance of the herder on the first night of their encampment. That he was a runaway was an open secret. He

stubbornly refused to reveal his name, so the men called him "Blue" because of the stained and soiled dragoon suit of that color he wore. His avowed mission was to "fight the Injuns." He carried a pistol which he declared in later life was "as big as the palm of my hand." History was to know him as Oliver P. Wiggins, for twelve years the intimate friend and assistant to Kit Carson, and himself a guide and hunter of much repute. But through all the long journey down to where the trail divided for Bent's Fort, and in the subsequent adventures, the two boys knew together, young Wiggins was "Blue" to Brad, and as Brad and Blue they entered into a boyish compact of friendship.

"How many of these wagons are bound for the Fort?" Brad asked Ned.

"Only two. The regular train started back in August. Blunt is taking this outfit down to Taos to trade with the Mexicans."

"Furs?"

"No, the Mexicans aren't much on trap-

ping. Silver and turquoise and dried beans—that's what the Captain'll get for his gunpowder and sleazy silk and white flour. The Fort's the place to go for fur trading. I don't want to boast, Brad, but as a plain matter of fact, we have the very best of the buffalo-robe trade. Not even the Astor Company compares with the business we do in them. You see, the Fort splits the Santa Fe Trail, really. There's the 'old route known as the Cimarron, but the Fort route saves a good deal of time for the Mexican-bound traveler."

"How old is the Fort?"

"Ten years. Doesn't seem that long since I went down there, a raw, scared boy of sixteen and with another raw, scared boy of sixteen, helped the Bents and the St. Vrain build the Fort."

"The other boy was Carson?"

"Sure—Carson. We all went through the smallpox siege together. I had it lightly, but Bent and Carson—the Indians didn't know Bill Bent when he finally lifted the

ban on the Fort and allowed them to come back.”

“ Tell me about it,” Brad begged. “ Who else was there? ”

“ The three Bents—Charles, William, and George,” Ned ticked off the names on his fingers. “ The two St. Vrans, Marcellin and Ceran. Ceran’s full name is——” he grinned at his nephew—“ Ceran de Hault de Lassus de St. Vrain! ”

“ Help! ” said Brad.

“ We don’t call him all that,” Ned comforted him. “ He’s a fine chap, too, though rather queer-looking. Anyway, as I was saying, five of those St. Louis traders came down to establish a fort of their own, and I came along because of Jim’s friendship for William Bent. Carson—well, he was another runaway, like the boy you were chumming with a while ago. We’d just got the Fort well started when smallpox broke out——”

“ But where did it come from—’way down there? ”

Ned gave a rueful chuckle. "We had it specially sent to us. In fact, we paid good money for it. You see," he went on in explanation, "Bill wanted to make his Fort sure-enough weatherproof. Adobe—'dobe, as we mostly call it down there—will crumble a bit under bad weather conditions, so Bent had a lot of Mexican wool sent across the river—the Arkansas River marks the border between American land and Mexican, you know—and mixed it with the 'dobe. And the wool was as full of smallpox as a dog is of fleas. We all took it—and thousands of Indians would have taken it, too, and died of it, because the pox goes hard with a redskin—if it hadn't been for Bent's forethought." Brad was deeply interested.

"What'd he do?"

"Sent a Mexican herder named Francisco to warn the Cheyennes not to come near the Fort. It was two years before we got it stamped out—the Mexican workers all had it, you see—and then Bent had everything burned that could carry the disease and sent

for the Indians to come back. No telling how many lives he saved, old Bill Bent!”

“He must be a wonderful man!”

“Wonderful? He’s more than that,” Ned said heartily. “He’s never done but one thing I couldn’t admire in the years I’ve been with him. That was marrying an Indian wife, Owl Woman. She has a daughter named Mary now, and I’m bound to say she’s made Bent a good wife.”

“Do many of them—white men, I mean—marry squaws?”

“More than I wish there did. Bent is very strict about it. He won’t recognize a marriage unless it’s been performed according to the rites he himself adopted, and he usually performs the ceremony himself. Any of the traders who takes an Indian wife without this ceremony is fined and forced to pay a certain sum to the chief of the tribe. Law and order are Bent’s watchwords down at the Fort. You’ll understand why when we get there.”

“Indians?”

“ Indians and Mexicans. The Cheyennes and Arapahoes have a winter camp in the Big Timbers, thirty-two miles from the Fort. The Red River Comanches and the Utes do all their trading with us, too. And about every tribe of redskins from the Rio Grande to the Colorado pays us a visit sooner or later. It takes discipline and diplomacy to keep peace with 'em all, and Bent has those qualities in equal measure.”

“ How about the Mexicans? ”

“ I'd rather do business with an Indian any day than with a Mexican,” Ned declared with emphasis. “ You never know where you're 'at' with a Mexican. An Indian is treacherous, but after you get used to him, you can pretty well foretell what he'll do under given circumstances. With a Mexican, it's different. He may be a yellow-livered coward one day, and as reckless and dangerous as one of his own rattlesnakes the next. Why, their own peons would rather work for an Indian master any day. The Cheyennes around the Fort have a pretty little way of

crossing the river and kidnapping peons to use as herders, and when the Mexicans come over to rescue their slaves, the peons'll hide out to escape 'em. That shows!"

Brad drank in, with eager ears, all that Ned could tell him of the Fort. More and more was it becoming to him, as it was in truth, a place unique in America. He pictured it standing alone on the great rolling plains, surrounded by savage tribes of Indians but itself as peaceful as a New England village. He thought of the men who had founded it: the Bents, each of whom had a history which already read like the wildest fiction; the two St. Vrain, reserved, inscrutable men who loved to explore the inaccessibleities of the Rocky Mountains; Kit Carson, who was rapidly becoming a national figure—though little did he realize it down in his humble home in Taos.

There was ample time for the narration of Ned's exciting tales. Day after day the train jogged southwest, and the monotony of it all began to rasp Brad's nerves.

The day's procedure never varied. The men rose with the sun, cooked and ate a hearty breakfast, yoked the oxen or harnessed the mules, and were off, not to pause till the noon hour, when a cold meal was eaten. There were no women in this outfit, and the rudest methods were employed with the cooking. Nevertheless the sour-dough bread was always light, the coffee strong and clear, and the bacon cooked to a nicety. A good outdoor cook—and every effort was made by the traders to obtain an experienced one—could turn out a good meal with meager supplies and only a fire of buffalo chips on which to cook it.

At sunset, camp was made near a water hole, the stock was picketed, or enclosed within the wagon circle, and the men unrolled their blankets in the open, or under the wagons, as they pleased.

The third or fourth night of their journey Brad had brought out his harmonica, a gift from St. Louis, which he could handle proficiently.

The delight of the drivers was pathetic. Hungry for music, they kept Brad playing until his lips were dry and his tongue swollen. Songs they knew, they sang, the chorus of voices rolling sonorously across the wide plain. New ones they practised until they learned them.

“Give us some music, kid,” came the general demand every night as soon as supper was over. And Brad would obligingly comply. Swaggering roustabout song, or sentimental ballad, it mattered not to the drivers. All they asked for was a “tune.”

“Jiggery Jones” was a favorite.

Jiggery Jones, Lord bless his bones,
Bought him a knife that was sharp and bright;
Bought him a gun and a horse that could run,
For to kill every Injun in sight.

CHORUS

Jiggery Jones!
Jiggery Jones!
What has become of his honor'ble bones?
'Twas not in a churchyard they silenced his
groans—

'Cause out on the prairie there ain't no stones.

Jig——ger——y Jones!

Pore Jiggery Jones!

The nights grew sharper and fires were kept, though the sun still blazed down on their heads all day.

Brad was proud of his comradeship with his young uncle and enjoyed the distinction of riding beside his wagon, but the hours he most enjoyed were those when he fell back to talk with his friend Blue. The two of them, though coming from vastly different homes, had much in common, not the least of which was their boyish admiration for Kit Carson, whom both cherished lively hopes of seeing on this thrilling expedition. How soon their hopes were to be realized, neither boy had the faintest idea.

It was the last of November before the Arkansas River was crossed and the train was close to the hostile Kiowa country.

CHAPTER THREE

“HEY, Hundley, come here!”

Captain Blunt beckoned to Ned, who promptly threw down the rope he was knotting and went toward the captain's wagon. As he went, he beckoned to Brad, who followed eagerly. An Indian runner had come into the camp an hour before, and Brad was agog with curiosity to know the news he had brought. That it was disquieting was evidenced by Captain Blunt's look of uneasiness. So perturbed he was that he took no notice of the boy, whom otherwise he would have dismissed from the interview.

“Hundley, that Crow that just came in tells me the Kiowas are on the warpath!”

Ned nodded assentingly, apparently unconcerned.

“But, man! We're supposed to be at

peace with the Kiowas! I had positive information to that effect before I left Independence. By the terms of an agreement made with them last fall——”

“Bah!” Ned interrupted. “When did a Kiowa ever respect any agreement? You can count on it, as surely as you can on the sun’s rising, that about once every two years they’ll go out and raise mischief with the whites, treaty or no treaty. I’ve been looking for just this message to come.”

“Oh, you have, have you?” The Captain threw heavy sarcasm into his voice. “Then maybe you’ll be good enough to tell me what we’re to do—fifty-two wagons loaded with valuable merchandise and a lot of greenhorn Missourians driving ’em!”

“They’ve all got guns, haven’t they?”

“Guns, yes! But what in thunder do they know about Injun fighting? Why in tarnation I was so foolish as to start out with a lot of mule-drivers—but I had a right to expect the Kiowas would keep the peace they promised!”

Ned Hundley yawned.

“There isn’t a Kiowa born that’ll keep any peace longer’n two years.”

“Well, what are we to do?” demanded the Captain sharply. “Hundley, stir yourself and give me some advice. You’re an old Indian man.”

Neither the Captain nor Ned himself saw the humor of so designating a young fellow of twenty-six. Experience and not years counted in this country, and, judged by the sharp battles and lesser skirmishes Hundley had had with the redskins, he was indeed an “old Indian man.”

“Ca’m yourself, Captain, ca’m yourself,” Ned drawled provokingly. “You may remember I sort of hinted back in Independence that it would be wise to take a few experienced men along. Now—there isn’t a thing you can do but keep driving straight ahead. If you go back, the Injuns’ll overtake you. Same if you go ahead.”

“You take it mighty blamed cool,” the other spluttered. “If you don’t care for

yourself and your goods, here's your nephew——”

“ Oh, I reckon Brad can take care of himself. He's a good shot.” The delicate but unmistakable emphasis Ned put on the pronoun made Blunt flush resentfully. He had made the mistake of economizing on his drivers, relying, despite Ned's warning, on the latest peace with the Kiowas. Now he bitterly repented his economy. Of what use to obtain drivers at low wage if he lost his entire stock of goods and even his life? The reflection did not make him the more pleased with Ned's attitude, and he gave vent to his feelings in a few sizzling words.

Ned listened, shrugged his shoulders, and walked away. He had said all he had to say to the Captain in Independence when he strongly advised a better equipment for the journey.

“ Let him stew in his own juice a while,” he remarked to Brad as the two went back to their wagon. “ A scare'll do him good.” Brad was puzzled.

“ But—Ned, it’s really pretty dangerous, isn’t it? ”

His young uncle looked at him keenly. “ Scared? ”

“ Not scared, exactly, but I think we ought to take precautions against a possible attack. It seems foolish to walk straight into danger.”

Ned gave his shoulder a whack that sent the boy reeling.

“ Good for you, old sport! Daredevil recklessness is a sign of ignorance everywhere. The experienced chap walks with his eyes open and dodges trouble whenever he can. Show me a man that ignores precautions, and I’ll show you a fool. Now I’ll tell you.” He sank his voice until it was inaudible to the men about him. “ I’m not worrying about the Kiowas, for this reason: Carson’ll know of their breaking their peace treaty, and he’ll come, or send some one along the trail to meet us. Old Blunt needn’t hold on to his scalp with both hands for a while yet. If there’s a whisper of unrest in the Black Hills on Monday, Carson’ll hear it down in

Taos on Tuesday and make preparations accordingly. I'm not worrying any. Carson'll look out for this train."

He proved to be a true prophet. Hardly had they come within twenty miles of the Kiowa territory when Carson appeared, leading a company of trappers from Taos, or "Touse," as it was generally called. Captain Blunt's relief was almost hysterical in its expression and the Missouri drivers were not less loud in their gratitude for the mountaineers' protection.

However, after two days of journeying together, the Missourians were amazed and deeply disgusted to see the rescue party on the third morning tie their horses to the wagon tails and themselves take cover beneath the canvas tops. The danger zone had been reached, and apparently Carson and his men had turned cowards.

The drivers made no effort to restrain their feeling of contempt.

"Did ye ever see the like of it?" one lanky individual demanded of the train at large.

“ Injun fighters, and they dive for kiver like a gal ’feared of a thunderstorm! I ain’t claimin’ to be no professional scout, but I’m blamed if I ain’t got nerve enough to stay out in daylight and keep holt of my gun.”

“ Wal, look at the little runt,” another said, referring to Carson. “ I been hearin’ of this here no-tor-yus fighter an’ I looked to see a fine, upstandin’ man. An’ what does he turn out to be? A baby-faced, blue-eyed, soft-spoken little feller that couldn’t scare a flock of wild turkeys away! I shore am disap-p’nted! ”

Brad also could not conceal his amazement at the action of the Carson men. The sight of twenty bearded mountaineers, fresh from hazardous adventure in the heart of the Indian country, crawling under the wagon covers like a flock of frightened women, dismayed and shocked him. He turned to his uncle only to receive another and far worse shock. Ned, too, had abandoned his horse and was even now drawing his boots beneath his own canvas cover. Captain Blunt, for

no reason that Brad could understand, was vainly trying to swing the train into the usual circle which was formed at night.

It began to dawn on Brad that not cowardice but a good and sufficient reason was responsible for the fighters' action.

When a sharp command from Ned bade him tie Greased Lightning to the wagon and crawl in beside his uncle, the boy wasted no time in question or remonstrance. Hardly was he in place before blood-curdling yells and war cries sounded from over the sand hills to the north and down swept a band of Kiowas, hideous in war paint, their almost naked bodies gleaming with oil, their lances brandished, their bows taut for the first shots. On they came straight toward the little huddle of wagons.

"Tell the men not to fire!" Carson called sharply; but the frightened drivers ignored the command and began emptying their guns toward the redskins, not a shot taking effect at that distance.

Carson and his men made no move. The

drivers had taken refuge inside the circle now and given themselves up for dead.

Nearer and nearer came the Kiowas, and arrows began to fall alarmingly close to the wagons.

Then from beneath the slightly rolled canvas covers, the ugly barrels of a score of rifles poked forth and a deadly fire of bullets mowed down the advance line of the Indians.

They halted in consternation, at once recognizing the tactics of experienced fighters. They had supposed the train to be manned by greenhorn drivers whom they could easily frighten away, after which they would plunder the richly laden wagons at their leisure.

Their brief hesitation was ended by another volley from the wagons. This time fully a score of naked braves tumbled from their horses and sprawled on the ground, most of them lifeless, a few of them twisting and writhing in pain.

“After ’em, men!”

Carson leaped from his wagon and was on his horse in an instant, followed by his com-



“AFTER 'EM, MEN!”—Page 48

pany. Ned joined them, and Brad sprang on Greased Lightning and galloped after. A wild exhilaration filled him. The remnant of the Kiowa band was fleeing madly toward the sand hills. As their pursuers pressed them more closely, they threw down their lances and bows and laid themselves along the backs of their horses and urged them to even greater speed.

“ Give it to 'em! ”

Carson, his usually mild eyes gleaming like blue ice, his face white with purpose, shouted the command and again the big rifles poured their relentless fire into the ranks of the fleeing Indians. The Kiowas could be taught to respect the terms of their peace treaties only by cruel punishment when they broke their vows to the white men. It was by such drastic remedies that Carson had come to be dreaded by the Indians all over the Southwest, and had made for himself such a reputation that the very mention of his name was often enough to turn an Indian attack.

An hour later, the train was once more in motion as peacefully as though nothing had occurred to halt its progress. The drivers were a chastened and humbled set of men who had no more to say of Indian-fighters who hid like girls in a thunderstorm.

Brad could not take his eyes from Carson. Like the Missouri greenhorns, he had been deeply disappointed in the appearance of the famous scout. He had vaguely thought to see a giant of a man, black-haired, with flashing black eyes and an expression of awe-inspiring ferocity. Instead he beheld a stocky person of less than ordinary height, his hair a meek brown, his eyes either a light blue or a gray, it was impossible to decide which. He spoke in a drawl, and so gently that the boy marveled that his words were ever obeyed.

That was Carson when inactive.

Now the scout's eyes were blue and blazing, his mouth was set in a taut grim line, and authority radiated from him. Brad noticed for the first time how broad and deep was his

chest, how the muscles beneath the deerskin coat he wore ridged themselves as he grasped his heavy gun.

He noticed, too, how implicitly these bearded companions of his obeyed his slightest word. Most of them were twice his age, but that they held him in the highest respect was evident.

The precision with which the repulse of the Kiowas had been carried forth told its own tale to Brad of hundreds of such skirmishes. The boy, pondering the episode, which he realized was but an episode and not an event in the life of Carson, conceived then and there an admiration for the quiet scout which was to be increased a hundredfold before the winter had passed.

“Say, Brad,” Blue began the moment his friend dropped back to the cavvy, “wasn’t that the grandest little dust-up you ever did see? Carson—say, I’d give ten years of my life just to go ’long with him and keep his boots greased!”

CHAPTER FOUR

“HEY, Brad! Wake up! We’re there!”

Brad Hundley, dozing in his saddle while the sagacious Lightning jogged faithfully along, started at his uncle’s shout. It was pitch dark, and strain his eyes as he would, he could see no evidence of the Fort.

“Not that way, boy! To your left—look to your left!”

Brad jerked about and nearly cried out in his surprise. An enormous white bulk gleamed dully in the darkness. In front was a light—a veritable twinkling light which—he was to discover in a few moments—came from a huge lantern hung outside the gates of the Fort.

“That’s it—that’s Bent’s Fort! We’re here at last.”

Brad wondered a little at the jubilation of

Ned's voice. What he did not realize, of course, was that the huge adobe enclosure was home to the young man: the only home he had known for ten years. Also there was for those who spent any time within the Fort a curious sort of fascination which drew them back to it, again and again, when they left its hospitable walls.

“Halt!”

The challenge rang from the sentinel inside the gates.

Ned Hundley answered cheerily.

“Wagons from Independence—Hundley in charge.”

There was a click, a ponderous creaking, and the gates swung open.

“Howdy, Ned! You're a day early, ain't ye? A couple of Cheyennes reported you on the trail day before yistiddy, and we figured you'd be here 'bout to-morrer.”

“We're loaded fairly light, and the mules are in good condition,” Ned answered, beckoning the driver of the second wagon to drive into the graveled enclosure which was known

to the white men as the court, and to the Mexicans as the *patio*. “Leave the wagons back in the sheds and turn the stock into the corral,” he directed. “Bent here?”

Before the man could answer a jovial voice hailed the travelers.

“Back, are you, Ned? Good! Had a safe trip, I hear, and no trouble with the Indians.”

“A safe trip,” Ned repeated, shaking the other’s hand heartily.

Brad thought of that thrilling incident with the Kiowas, and wondered that no reference was made to it. Later, he came to agree with those within the Fort that any journey which was without casualties was a safe one, no matter how many Indian attacks were repelled.

“Bill, this is Jim’s boy, Brad. You remember Jim?”

“You bet I remember Jim! Glad to see you, Brad. Come to spend a year or so at the Fort? That’s good! That’s good!”

The warmth of the welcome stilled the last

qualm the boy had had about his unannounced descent on the Fort. Plainly William Bent was delighted to have his friend's son as his guest for an indefinite time.

"I'll call Charlotte and have her rustle you some food——"

"We've eaten." Ned stayed him with up-raised hand. "What we both want—and all we want for to-night—is a bed under us. We've been on the trail since long before sun-up."

Brad was indeed stumbling with weariness as he followed a hastily summoned squaw to the upper tier of the fort rooms. It was a clean little room, its walls gleaming with whitewash in the light of the candle his guide carried. It contained a camp bed, a roughly hewn wooden chest, and a stool. Brad pulled off his clothes and, without even a glance at his novel quarters, blew out the candle and flung himself down upon the blankets and was asleep.

He was awakened by a curious medley of sounds. Cocks were crowing loudly some-

where outside his window, dogs barked, voices shouted.

He sat up, bewildered to find himself in a strange place, above all, a place with walls and a roof. Bright sunlight streamed through the window, which was nothing more than a slit in the adobe wall. The whiteness of the room was dazzling. The whole building, he learned later, was kept in this spotless condition by frequent applications of whitewash made from a certain kind of clay found not far from the Fort.

Not stopping to dress, the boy thrust his head through the opening and gazed down at the scene in the courtyard below.

Brad gasped, unable for a moment to speak.

It was surely as strange and interesting a sight as any boy could imagine in his wildest dreams. Just below him was a square, unroofed space, its surface neatly graveled. Opening off this were the rooms of the Fort, set in the massive walls. These walls were eighteen feet high, seven feet thick at the

base, and tapering off to two feet at the top. The fort itself was a huge rectangle, one hundred and fifty by one hundred feet. It faced east, where the gates opened directly upon the prairie across which ran the trail.

The court was filled with people coming and going busily: trappers in buckskin shirts and fringed leggings; Mexican herders in flaring trousers and sugar-loaf hats; Indians blanket-wrapped, or nearly naked despite the sharp December air; squaws decked in odds and ends of American finery.

From the blacksmith shop at the rear rang the sound of steel on steel, and a steady hammering indicated the carpenters' quarters. Clerks stood, notebook in hand, checking the goods which were being unpacked from Ned Hundley's wagons. The corral behind was indicated by squeals from the mules and an occasional neigh from a horse which, for some reason, had been held back from the drove, turned out at sunrise to graze. All was confusion, hurry, and a certain atmosphere of holiday merriment.

Brad suddenly wanted to be in the midst of it. He dressed rapidly and made his way down the rude stairs hewn in the wall and presently found himself at the east end of the court off which the store and warehouses opened. Here Ned accosted him.

“Hi, young fellow! Get your sleep out? I reckon you could make out with some breakfast now, couldn’t you?”

Brad assented emphatically. Despite his curiosity about the place in which he found himself, he was ravenous and wanted nothing else so much as some of the food the savory odors of which reached him from the adjoining kitchen.

“I suppose we eat out there?” He jerked his head toward the *patio* where several iron pots simmered over small fires, and Indians and trappers squatted, dipping gravely into the food they contained.

“No, we’ll eat in the dining-room. Come along—I’ll show you.”

Brad’s uncle led the way to a long room in the southern wall, and here Brad was sur-

prised to find a polished table, chairs, and even a cabinet which contained dishes.

“ Why—it’s just like a house! ”

“ It’s a heap better than lots of houses,” Ned asserted proudly. “ We haven’t spent ten years down here without fixing the place up. Every trip we bring back something in the way of furniture from Independence. Sit down and I’ll yell for Charlotte to bring us some breakfast.”

At his long “ Charrrrrlotte! ” a fat negro woman appeared, ivory teeth displayed in a grin of welcome, kinky wool almost concealed beneath a bright red turban.

“ Howdy, Marse Hundley! ” she exclaimed, bobbing a curtsy. “ Huccome you git here so soon? You-all bring Charlotte some fofurraws? ”

“ You bet,” Ned assured her. “ But we’ve got to eat before we do anything else. We’re empty all the way down, Charlotte. What you got to give us? ”

“ Charlotte feed you,” she promised. “ Who de young man wid you? ”

“He’s another Marse Hundley—my brother’s boy. You’ll have to make him some of your pumpkin pies, Charlotte, and put some fat on those bones of his.”

The negress grunted. “Punkin pies, punkin pies! All I hyar all day long is ‘Charlotte, mek some punkin pies!’”

“That’s what you get for making them so well. Brad, just wait till you’ve tasted those pies! M’m! Wouldn’t one hit the spot right this minute? Back in Independence there was a man wanted to sell me a cook—a pastry cook, Charlotte! He said she could make better pies than anybody west of the Mississippi. Offered to let me eat one——”

Charlotte’s eyes flashed. “Effen you-all brung any Missouri nigger down to ma kitchen——”

“Why, Charlotte, how could you imagine such a thing?” Ned was plaintively reproachful. “You know what I told that man? I said, ‘We have a cook down at the Fort that can make pies a king might be

proud to eat. Why, they come all the way down from Philadelphia and all the way up from the Horn just to get a taste of Charlotte's pies. Don't talk to me about your pastry cooks,' I told him. 'I'm going straight back as fast as the mules can carry me to the best pastry cook in the States, let alone Mexico.' ”

Charlotte had been listening critically, her head on one side. Now, apparently satisfied with this extravagant tribute, she nodded and disappeared in the direction of her kitchen.

“Have to butter the old gal up now and then,” Ned explained with a grin.

“What was that she asked you for? Fofurraw—what?”

“Fofurraw. It's what the Indians call ribbons and beads and stuff—folderols. It's come to be a regular trade term. They'll swap their finest skins for a handful of gewgaws; and the men are just as bad.”

“And did you bring Charlotte some?”

“You bet I did. Some for you to give her, too. Charlotte's a character. It'll pay

you to get on the good side of her, Brad. She's really the belle of the Fort."

"Belle? A nigger?" The Missouri boy raised his brows in acute disgust.

"Color doesn't mean much down here, you'll find. We have it in all shades. Charlotte says herself that she's 'de onlee ladee in de whole Injun country.' Look, here she comes now with food enough to feed a regiment, I'll bet!"

The fat cook entered, followed by a train of satellites. Before the two hungry travelers she set a platter of bacon and eggs, the choicest dish the Fort had to offer. Great slices of bread made from unbolted flour, to be spread sparingly with molasses, were stacked on a plate. Of butter there was none, nor cream to put into the great mugs of strong black coffee. But there was the promised pumpkin pie, thick and luscious and creamy, its crust flaking away at the touch of the fork. Charlotte stood by, fat hands on her hips, and watched the consumption of the bounty she had provided.

“ Dem Injuns all de time steal from Charlotte, but Charlotte know how to fin’ food fur her friends,” she observed complacently. Then she put a question to Brad: “ You-all got a cook back home? ” And upon his assenting, she said jealously, “ She mek you punkin pies as good as that? ”

Obeying an admonitory nudge from Ned, Brad burst into fulsome praise of the pie he had just eaten.

“ As good as this? ” he exclaimed. “ Why, hers is watery and tough—almost uneatable compared to this! ” Mentally he offered apology to old Mammy Bets, whose pastry was quite as good as Charlotte’s. “ This is the grandest pumpkin pie that anybody ever ate anywhere, any place. It’s worth the journey from Independence down here just to taste it. I could eat pie like this all day and all night, if I got the chance.” He stopped to take breath.

Again Charlotte cocked her head to one side, critically weighing the quality and extent of the praise she lived on. She nodded

at last and began gathering together the dishes the two had emptied.

“ I mek you more punkin pies,” she told them graciously, and Brad sank back in his seat, spent with his oratorical effort.

“ Good work! ” Ned approved. “ If you succeed as well in all your contacts in the Fort—hello, Bill! Brad and I are late this morning. We’ve just finished breakfast.”

“ Charlotte give you something good? ” their host inquired solicitously. “ I meant to speak to her about Brad here—prejudice her in his favor——”

Ned chuckled. “ Brad’s been soft-soaping her like a house afire. She’s promised to make him lots of pumpkin pies. You know what that means! ”

Bent smiled. “ Evidently you know how to handle her, young man! You’ll find it pays to keep on the soft side of our two Fort females, Charlotte and Rosalie. Rosalie’s the wife of the carpenter. They’re privileged characters, and they can make it mighty uncomfortable for anybody they take a dis-

like to. Now, Ned, I've had the boys at work unpacking the wagons, and if you'll step around to the store-rooms we can check over the lists. I guess Brad can look after himself for a while, can't you, Brad? "

The boy assented joyfully and presently found himself out in the bright winter sunshine, his eyes roving eagerly from one strange sight to another.

CHAPTER FIVE

BRAD HUNDLEY never forgot his first day in Bent's Fort. Too young and untraveled to appreciate the unique position the place occupied, undoubtedly the most isolated dwelling-place in our country, nevertheless he succumbed at once to the fascination it held for white man and savage alike.

Three hundred yards to the south and east flowed the Arkansas River. Just outside the east gate was a brass cannon which was punctiliously dragged in at sundown and returned to its place each morning. A little distance away to the front of the Fort was a small graveyard, a piteous reminder of the havoc wrought ten years before by the small-pox.

There was a narrow gate at the north for the horses to pass through. Back of the

clerk's quarters, the blacksmith shop, the carpenter shop, and the wagon shed, was the wide corral with snubbing-posts at either end. The ground was level for two miles outside the Fort to the north, but sloped gently down to the river on the other side. In the center of the graveled court was a hide-press, where all winter long the hunters bound their robes and furs into bales.

Brad went through the gate, edging his way past the Indians who constantly entered and left the Fort, and surveyed its massive proportions from a little distance outside.

He thrilled at the warlike appearance it presented. There was a bastion at the northwest and another at the southeast corner. The towers were loopholed for rifles, and along the battlements walked patrols with loaded muskets. The guards in the bastions stood always with burning matches by the cannon. Though not a military fort but a private enterprise of the Bents and the St. Vrain, no precaution had been overlooked to defend this fastness from the assaults of the

Indians, whose white skin lodges along the river bank shone brightly in the sun.

“Great place, ain’t it?” a voice inquired at Brad’s elbow.

He turned to see a gnarled figure dressed in trapper’s clothes and with long gray hair escaping from a coonskin hat. The old man had come up with so noiseless a tread that Brad had been unaware of his presence until he spoke.

“Great? I should say it is great!” The boy let out a long sigh of admiration.

His companion was evidently pleased by this tribute, for he suddenly began to talk, gesticulating with a hand from which three fingers were missing.

“Bent, he done the thing up right whilst he was a-doin’ it. Everybody said it war a foolhardy idee, coming way down hyar whar Injuns is thicker’n flies round a ’lasses bar’l. But Bent he ginerally knows what he’s about, it’s been my experience. Sartain he’s made heaps of money outen the fur business.”

“Who brings in all the skins? The Indians?”

“Injuns, and the regular trappers and Carson and his men,” said the old fellow. “I done a lot of trapping my own self in my day. Come to that, I kin bring in my load o’ beaver—full-grown beaver, too, not countin’ the kittens—with the best of ’em yit, even if I be shorn o’ some of my members.” He held up his mutilated hand for evidence.

“Caught it in a trap?” Brad asked sympathetically.

“Worser’n that,” the other said in disgust. “A Injun arrer tuck ’em off cleaner’n a knife could do it. Crow, doggone ’em all!”

“Are there many Crows about here?”

“Sonny, there air every kind o’ ornery redskin the Lord ever made—if He did make ’em. I ain’t layin’ the blame of it on Him, noways. I reckon they trace their ancestry back to another party we hear considerable of. As I was sayin’, there air all kinds o’ Injuns hangin’ ’round this Fort day *an’* night.”

“Are they allowed inside the Fort at night?”

“Only them what’s related to folks inside,” was the disgusted answer. “An’ that’s a considerable number.”

“How many people really belong here?”

“Wal—Bent hires between sixty an’ a hundred men, ’cordin’ to the season, an’ mostly they have families—big ones, too. That makes quite a mess o’ folks to be shut inside come sundown.”

“Are all the Indians—I mean those around here——” he swept a wide circle with his arm which took in the surrounding prairie—
“hostile?”

“Not the Cheyennes—leastways, not the Southern Cheyennes. Bent married a Cheyenne wife, you know, an’ so did Carson. That helps to keep’ em friendly. The Northern Cheyennes air apt to kick up a ruckus now an’ then, specially when they tie up with the Sioux.”

“Aren’t they the same tribe—the Northern and the Southern Cheyennes?”

“Used to be. Ain’t now. I’ll tell you how it happened.” He motioned Brad to a seat on a hummock of dried grass and took a position cross-legged beside the boy.

“Back eight years ago the Cheyennes all belonged to one tribe. They gathered one fall on the Cache la Poudre River for a council. Some of them was gittin’ sort o’ tired o’ the Black Hills an’ wanted to move on. Besides, White Thunder, one o’ their chiefs—he had a vision. The Great Spirit told him, he claimed, to go up the river and turn into a certain cañon. He’d see an eagle thar, he was promised, an’ he was to shoot it. Whar it fell, thar’d be a bunch o’ medicine arrers. He was to take them arrers to the next council fire an’ on account o’ them the talk thar would be true talk, y’understand, an’ good medicine.

“Wal, White Thunder done it all accordin’ to specifications, an’ he says the Great Spirit told him to move on down to the Arkansas River an’ make a new home for the Cheyennes. Some was for it an’ some was

agin it, an' the result was that the tribe split in two, half comin' down here whilst 'tother half stayed where they was. The Southern Cheyennes air about half a degree less ornery than the Northern Cheyennes, an' we git along with them right good. They hate the Crows, an' *we* hate the Crows, so we got some-thin' in common, so to speak."

"Look, look!" Brad suddenly interrupted. "Up there on the top of the wall! It looks like—it certainly can't be——"

"You mean them peacocks?" his companion inquired calmly. "Sure we got peacocks, a pair of 'em—Thunder Birds, the Injuns call 'em. Bent he brung 'em down two trips back to give sort of a fancy touch to the Fort. We did have a pair of bald-headed eagles, too, but some Injun buck, he tuck a fancy to make hisself a war bonnet out o' the feathers an' he killed 'em."

"Wasn't Mr. Bent angry? What did he do to the thief?"

"Nothin'," said the other deliberately. "For the very good reason that he didn't git

no chance. The buck's own tribe put him to death."

"Killed him? Just for stealing a pair of eagles?"

"Thar wasn't no 'jist' about it, sonny. Them eagles brung good luck to the Fort, an' everybody knowed it. The Cheyennes was scared somethin' would happen to 'em on account of the birds bein' killed, so they made an offerin' of the thief to the Great Spirit."

"How about the peacocks? I should think the Indians would covet them, too!"

The old man chuckled. "Can't git an Injun within touchin' distance o' them birds. When they let out a screech—an' you know what a gosh-awful noise they make!—every redskin on the place goes green under his paint and has pressin' business elsewhere. Wish my old scalp was as safe as them peacocks' tails air!"

Brad belatedly remembered his manners. "My name is Brad Hundley and I'm from Missouri. I came down with——"

"Yeah, sonny, I know all about who you

come with. I'm Bim Black, in case you got reason to call my name."

"B-Bim Black?" It seemed to the boy quite the most ludicrous name he had ever heard.

"Bim—short for 'Bimelech,'" the owner of that cognomen answered gloomily. "Ain't it a sight—wishin' an entitlement like that on a pore innocent babe? Howsomever, it makes a nice short name when you come to think of it—Bim Black. Everybody from the Picketwire River to the Colorado knows Bim Black."

"Well, Mr. Black——"

The other let out a shrill cackle. "Mister? I ain't never been called Mister in all my born days. Say Bim . . . an' I'll come if I hear ye."

"Bim, then. Don't you have any snow down here? It's December, and almost as warm as it was in October."

"Not a great deal of snow. Plenty of cold weather, though. Reckon the season's sort of backward this year to give ye chanct

to look us over." He grinned at Brad. "Look at them dirty Injuns beginnin' to slip through the gates. That means grub's on, an' we better be gittin' in ourselves."

"Can anybody that wants to come in for dinner?"

"Just about. The camp cooks pile up a mess of buffler meat and set the kettle whar all hands can dip in. An' thar's always plenty of bread for everybody, seems like. You come along with me now an' I'll show you how Bent's Fort feeds its folks."

Brad followed his new acquaintance and presently they were inside the court, the boy's eyes stretched to their widest extent at the huge dinner party going on before him. No less than six iron pots stood on the gravel of the enclosure. Copper-colored hands and the hairy ones of the trappers alike were stretched to dip of their contents. Squaws and children waited humbly in the background until the men had finished, then they, too, came forward to obtain their share.

The Mexicans ate in a group of their own,

Bim explaining to Brad that their food was so highly seasoned with red peppers that it was unpalatable to the others.

After dinner the men withdrew to the walls, and propping themselves against the adobe support, filled and lighted their long-stemmed Indian pipes carved from stone and smoked peacefully. Occasionally they passed the pipe to a silently waiting Indian, who in turn passed it to his brothers until the tobacco was gone.

Brad was presently summoned to his own meal in the dining-room; a meal which had certain delicacies of cooked rice and smoked buffalo tongue added to the stewed buffalo meat which composed the trappers' fare. Charlotte and Andrew Green, Bent's own servant, served the dinner.

"Been amusing yourself, Brad?" Ned inquired, as the boy took his seat at the long table. "Find somebody to show you about?"

"An old fellow named Bim Black."

Bent nodded, holding his cup for Andrew

to refill. “Bim’s a good guide—none better. Did you notice that three fingers are gone from his hand?”

“Yes. He said an Indian arrow took them off.”

“Did he tell you how it happened?” And as Brad shook his head, Bent went on: “Bless his old gizzard, he wouldn’t, at that! He lost those fingers by deliberately thrusting his hand between me and a Crow arrow. It was when we were building the Fort. I was leaning against the outside of the west wall, directing the Mexican laborers, and a band of Crows came galloping over the plains. Bim and I were the only men armed, and we used all the ammunition we had in repelling them. Did it, too, but as they rode away, one of them sent a final arrow at us. It passed under my arm and pinned my shirt to the wall so I couldn’t move. The redskins saw what had happened and with a whoop one of them sent another in my direction—straight at my heart. I ducked, but it would have got me if Bim hadn’t flung out his hand and caught

the arrow through the fingers. They were so badly mutilated that I had to amputate them. You can guess the debt of gratitude I've felt to old Bim ever since."

Brad mused in silence over this story. The point that impressed him the most was that the old man had made no mention of his own heroic part in it. Brad owned to himself that if he had so bravely acquitted himself, the temptation to relate the incident to a stranger would have been very strong. He resolved to see more of the old fellow and persuade him to tell some of the stories of which, Bent informed him, nobody had a better store than Bim Black.

Brad spent the afternoon going through the rooms of the Fort, and marvelled at the space which the walls afforded for living quarters, warehouses, and stores, which were, to all intents and purposes, regular shops.

He went to bed that night with his head a jumble of Indians and Mexicans, trappers and traders, the civilized if not actually luxurious quarters of Bent's rooms, in sharp con-

trast to the savage life which went on about the Fort, Charlotte and Rosalie, Andrew Green and Bim Black, peacocks and mules, bear traps and Murphy wagons.

CHAPTER SIX

HARDLY had Brad Hundley settled himself in the room assigned to him when there occurred an incident which made him for the time being the hero of the Fort. It happened in this wise.

To the north of the Fort was a level prairie on which the horses and mules were turned each day to graze the short, dry grass. A herder, usually one of the Mexicans, was put in charge, and to insure his horse being always available in case of attack, it was picketed on a rope near the herd.

On this particular day the Mexican herder had been replaced by one of Bent's favorite trappers, who had declared himself "sick an' tired of 'sociatin' with so many durned Injuns," and craved a day's solitude in the open. Bent was always indulgent with his men, and

gave Jack Long permission to take Carlos' place for as long as he cared to, Carlos assenting with all the enthusiasm which came from anticipation of long hours dozing within the Fort.

"Keep yore eye peeled for Comanches," Bim Black warned the new herdsman. "I smell 'em nearabout."

It was one of Bim's favorite theories that he could not only smell hostile Indians approaching but could name the tribe by the particular odor they gave off. Brad grinned at this theory, but to his surprise several of the trappers within the Fort supported the old man in it.

"Hope you do," Long said in reply to the warning. "I'd like to meet up with an Injun I could shoot at without bein' skeered I was pickin' off one o' Bent's family-in-law. I shorely do git tired havin' to be so mealy-mouthed to a dirty redskin." Bent's insistence on a friendly attitude toward the Indians within the walls was sometimes resented by his trappers.

It proved that Long's wish was to be realized to an extent which seemed likely to cost him his life.

So far the season had been a mild one and grazing was still good, but the long summer had pushed the range farther and farther to the north. Also Long's moody determination to get as far as possible from the Indians had got the better of his good judgment. The horses were more than a mile away from the Fort walls when the young herder's ears were assailed by the dreaded Comanche yell, a cause for instant alarm.

Over the prairies they galloped, some forty or fifty braves, and as they neared the startled horses, they spread in a fan-shaped band to close in upon them and drive them away. Jack cursed his own foolishness bitterly as he saw that widening of the attackers. It was a trick which had been carefully taught them by the white man. Before the arrival of the hunters within the Fort, no Comanche, dull of wit and helpless off his horse, had known enough to employ this bit of technical

warfare. As a rule, they rushed in a compact mass and were easy to handle by a few skilled marksmen whose first shots sent panic into the main body.

“Fellow, you shorely got your work laid out for you now,” Jack assured himself.

He reached his horse in three great leaps and turned its head straight toward the advancing Indians. The herd was well trained for the work it was now called on to do. At Jack’s imperative whistle, the lead horse wheeled in the direction of the Fort and the rest followed, Jack cutting in at the rear between the herd and the rapidly advancing Indians to encourage his charges with voice and far-flung lasso.

From the battlement the patrols saw the flight as it drew near and gave word to the rest. Soon the top of the walls was crowded with spectators, cheering and encouraging the young herder in his task. It was of no use to send a relief. The whole issue was one of speed. If Jack could bring the herd within firing distance of the Fort, the rifles

from the loopholes and the cannon in the bastions would come to his defence.

The Comanches knew this, and spurred their tough little ponies forward in a desperate effort to overtake the herder. If he could be brought down from his saddle, the Indians could turn the herd northward and make off with their prize without hindrance from those within the Fort.

On swept the horses with Jack at their heels. On came the painted Comanches, their terrifying yells adding to the excitement of the herd. It began to look as though Jack would make it, and the throng on the battlements went wild.

“Speed her up, Jack!”

“Nearly there, old boy!”

“Come along, Jack Long!”

And then . . .

“Aaaaahhhhhh!” from a hundred throats in a cry of rage and grief.

Jack had gone down under a Comanche arrow, better aimed than its fellows. For a moment his horse plunged blindly on, carry-

ing the herd before him; then he stopped, turning his head over his shoulder and whinnying questioningly. The herd wavered and a Comanche buck slid his mount in front of the bewildered animals and skillfully turned them back.

A roar of rage went up again from the battlements, a roar which died suddenly at the sight of another figure galloping from the west, a figure in whom Ned Hundley recognized with mingled pride and terror his nephew Brad.

Brad had been conducting some explorations of his own outside the Fort. Both Ned and Bent had warned him not to go out of sight of the walls, particularly when alone. The boy had fully intended to obey this injunction. But the day had been crisply exhilarating, Greased Lightning had enjoyed three days' rest in the corral and was brimful of energy, and before Brad realized what he was about, he had lost sight of the Fort altogether.

The interminable flatness of the prairie

fascinated him, used as he was to the beautiful rolling hills of his own State. The clear air deceived him as to distances. He had ridden on and on, and was roused from his absorption only by the sound of Comanche yells borne on the wind to his ears. He turned Lightning's head toward home and rode at top speed.

He had rounded the northwest corner of the Fort and was making for the horse-gate in the north wall, when he saw young Long go down with a Comanche arrow in his side. He saw, too, the slippery Indian who had succeeded in turning the herd back toward the plain.

Brad's rifle leaped to his shoulder. There was a crack, a puff of smoke, and the wily Comanche plunged forward over the neck of his pony. The wild cheers from the battlements which greeted this shot encouraged the boy.

But Brad's troubles had just begun. Encouraged by their companion's success in slipping between the walls and the herd, three other Indians swept forward and were al-

most upon Brad before he saw them. Again his rifle spoke, and again an Indian wavered and fell from his horse.

The Comanches, for all their evil reputation, were cowards at heart. They never attacked save when their numbers overwhelmed by great odds their white enemies. The sudden appearance of Brad and the success of his two shots frightened them badly. He had acquired by this time the regulation trapper suit of buckskin, with deep fringes at arm and leg seams. The sureness of his aim and the similarity of his coloring to that of Carson made the Comanches suspect him of being the man whom they held in almost superstitious awe. The two who remained of the advance guard fled incontinently toward their companions.

“Brad! Brad Hundley!” the cheers from the battlements rang out.

“Come on, Brad!” It was Ned’s urgent voice. “Don’t mind the herd—come on!”

It was then that Brad saw Jack Long, lying dead or unconscious, he could not tell

which, in the very pathway of the retreating Comanches. Brad knew that this tribe, of all others, placed the greatest value on the white man's scalp. He had heard that the Comanche would dare more to obtain this proof of his own bravery than he would for anything else. Brad had not the slightest doubt that the two who were rapidly bearing down toward the prone body of Jack would seize that body and rip the scalp from its head.

A geyser of righteous indignation rose in Brad's heart. The white man's inherited hatred of Indian atrocities was suddenly his. He determined at any cost to save Long from this terrible fate.

As he leveled his gun once more, he had time for the ironic realization that the very marksmanship which had sent him down here in an effort to keep the peace with the Sac Indians was now to be employed in warfare against another tribe of redskins. He set his teeth and determined that his skill should count—heavily!

His finger pressed the trigger. There was

the strong recoil of the heavy gun, and acrid smoke for a moment blotted out the scene before him. When it cleared, he had the satisfaction of seeing that only one of the enemy now galloped back to his tribe, and that without a glance at Long's figure on the ground.

The herd, thrown into a fresh panic by the smell of gunpowder, were running away from the Fort at top speed. Brad knew that he must intercept them and turn them back. It was then that Greased Lightning justified his name. Responding nobly to Brad's shouted appeal, he stretched his legs in the long stride of his Kentucky forebears. It required but a few minutes of this pace to overtake the frightened horses and mules, and the intelligent Lightning swerved at the precise angle needed to turn their stampede into an equally rapid progress toward home.

"Bully boy!" yelled Brad exultantly. "Now give me time, old man, to pick up Long!"

He pulled the quivering horse to a stop and bent tenderly above the fallen herder.

To his infinite relief he was met by a grin—a strained and somewhat agonized grin, but nevertheless a grin.

“You shore kin shoot, boy,” the wounded man whispered. “’Twas almost wuth git-tin’ plugged through the side to see them Comanches git such a grand surprise.”

“Can you help yourself at all?” Brad asked anxiously. “If the Indians see that I’ve stopped——”

“Don’t worry about them Comanches,” Long said with fine contempt. “They’re still a-streakin’ it across the prairie. They’ve had their little dose for the present.”

“Put your arm over my shoulders and let me lift you,” Brad urged. “Lightning will carry double.”

“No need, Brad,” a new voice spoke. Ned and William Bent sprang off their horses. “We’ll take care of Jack now. Easy there, old man; don’t try to move.”

From the north gate of the Fort riders were pouring. Some herded the mules and horses safely into the corral. Others put



“YOU SHORE KIN SHOOT, BOY.”—Page 90

Long on an improvised litter and bore him tenderly to a room off the court.

Brad was surprised to see that Bent himself set about dressing the wound in matter-of-fact fashion.

“Is he a doctor?” he inquired of Ned.

“All the doctor we’ve ever had down here, and a blamed good one at that. I’ve seen him amputate legs, probe for bullets, nurse men through fevers and all sorts of illnesses. He’ll put Jack to rights if any one can.”

The herder’s wound proved to be a serious but not a fatal one. Bent extracted the arrow—an exquisitely painful process because of the backward turning barb at the tip—bathed the wound with clean water and bandaged it. After that there was nothing to do but give Nature a chance to repair the damage. This Bent was wise enough to do without the cupping and leeching so prevalent in the East. Also he violated the accepted rules of nursing by giving the patient all the cold water he wished to drink, a daring procedure which Brad watched anxiously.

In a week's time Jack was able to sit up, and in a month he was as good as new.

Long before then Brad, to his own great embarrassment, found himself a marked figure at the Fort. The accuracy of his shots, his presence of mind and bravery were complimented again and again.

Brad was sharp enough to realize that these qualities appeared remarkable to the men only because he was a "greenhorn." If the rescue had been effected by one of their own number, it would have been accepted as being all in the day's work, and no further mention have been made of it.

Nevertheless, Brad could not resist a boyish pride in his popularity, and his uncle's hearty words of praise completed his satisfaction.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIFE within the Fort soon settled down to a daily routine for Brad. The men rose at six these winter mornings, though he learned that in summer they were out of their beds at dawn. The moment the gates were opened, the Indians began to stalk in, silent and dignified, their association with the white men evidently a source of pride to them.

For the most part they were the friendly Cheyennes and Utes, though occasionally a small party of Crows or Arapahoes came to exchange their peltries for coffee, gunpowder, and whiskey.

Of the latter, they obtained very little, and that under protest from Bent. Brad was surprised to learn that the founder of the Fort had in the beginning made a strong effort to eliminate whiskey from trade altogether, but was forced, by the unscrupulous

methods of other traders who offered poisonous liquor at unfair prices, to yield to the demand for “fire water.”

He kept this commodity under the strictest control. To no Indian would he give more than a pint, and as it sold for from \$3 to \$5 and a prime buffalo hide was worth but \$1, no thirsty redskin was able to overindulge his longing. Moreover, Bent would allow no drinking among the Indians within the Fort. Each bottle of whiskey—and they were curiously shaped bottles of blue or green glass, specially made for the Fort, and a guarantee everywhere on the prairie of the purity of the liquor—must be carried back to the purchaser’s own dwelling-house before it was consumed.

The wisdom of this course can readily be seen. With never less than five thousand Indians in the immediate vicinity and often the number reaching to twice that, an unrestrained use of the intoxicant would have resulted in attacks which would have wiped out the Fort and its residents.

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“ Do they want to trade for coffee, too? ”
Brad inquired of the clerk who told him these facts.

“ Very little. It’s the trappers who want that. And the Mexicans. They’ll bring in their furs and the first thing they ask for—after tobacco, of course—is coffee. It sells for \$3 a pint cup.”

“ What do the Indians like best, next to whiskey? ”

The clerk grinned. “ Sugar and abalone shells.”

“ Shells? What on earth do they want with shells? ”

“ Haven’t you seen them wearing them in their ears? Why, I’ve known a particularly fine shell to bring four buffalo hides in trade. The chiefs saw it into two oblong parts and then square the pieces. They polish the outside, and make a hole in the small end to hang in their ears. The squaws get the bits that are left.”

Brad liked to loiter about the store-rooms, watching the steady stream of Indians and

trappers who brought in bundles of green furs to be appraised, weighed, and paid for in merchandise.

One morning there was a great commotion at the gates and Brad was told that the Suh-tai and the Hill people, His-si-o-mé-ta-ne, had returned from the foothills where they went annually for mule deer.

“Now we’ll fill our shelves with venison,” the clerk said with satisfaction. “They’re the finest hunters of the lot, the Hill people. We buy much of our meat from them—what we don’t get from Carson and his trappers.”

“I should think you’d get all of your meat from the Indians,” Brad suggested. “When they do nothing but hunt all the time, I should think they’d have a lot more than they needed for their own use.”

The clerk made a gesture of repugnance. “Did you ever watch an Indian preparing meat for food? His methods aren’t—well, we don’t buy from any but the Hill people, and then we insist on having the carcass just as it fell. As for killing more than they need,

you'd be surprised at how little they really are able to bring down with their arrows. This talk of the Indian's being such a sure shot is all foolishness. Some of them, I grant you, are expert bowmen; but for the most part, they waste a good many arrows before they hit anything."

Brad learned also that the Cheyennes went every fall to the mountains to obtain lodge-pole pines and a kind of cedar used in making bows. He thought longingly of that annual trek and wondered if by any chance Ned would allow him to go with a friendly tribe.

The opening of the Fort gates each morning was a good deal like attending a daily circus, the boy thought. First through was a swarm of Indian dogs, furtive, cowardly creatures, their eyes rolling cautiously in the direction of the white man who was their implacable enemy. The men had reason to dislike these Indian dogs. They were alive with fleas, they invariably had mange, they stole food from the very hands of the packers and clerks.

“The old man—” this was the designation of the Fort’s owner by Brad’s friend, the clerk— “has warned the Indians again and again not to let the dogs in. At first we tried killing the curs when the rule was disobeyed, but the pesky redskins dressed and ate their pets right in the court and it turned the men’s stomachs so that they refused to shoot any more of the dogs.”

“But don’t the Indians have to obey Bent?” Brad’s voice betrayed his astonishment that any edict of the mighty William’s could be disregarded.

“The old man is wise enough to know what he can insist on and what he’d better kind of wink at,” was the answer. “He’s had to make so many rules that are important that he goes easy on the unimportant ones. Anyway, the dogs keep coming, and nothing is done to stop ’em that I know of. I advise you to keep any property of yours that you specially care about inside your chest, or those dratted animals will carry it away some day.”

On the heels of the dogs came their owners, the bucks in advance, women and children trailing after. The squaws strutted about in all the glory of their own beads and the bits of tinsel and tawdry finery they could beg from the white men. Tiny bells were sewn here and there in their clothes, and their wearers jingled them ceaselessly and proudly.

After breakfast, a meal eaten by the Fort's official residents in the dining-room and by the countless visitors and transients from the common pots in the court, an air of brisk business settled down upon the place. The fur presses were inspected, the bales weighed, tagged, and stored for the next trip to Independence. The carpenter and the blacksmith were kept busy all day long, seeing that the wagons and other equipment were always in first-class condition.

After dinner, which was but a repetition of breakfast, the men lounged about the corral, the leather-clad mountaineers busy with decks of euchre or seven-up, and in many

cases gambling away the pelts for which they had often risked their lives.

There was one scene which never failed to bring a chuckle to Brad's lips.

"What on earth are they doing?" he demanded of Ned, as the two came upon a group of Indian women and children, seated cross-legged on the ground. Each pair of jaws moved rhythmically, industriously. Brad could not understand it.

"They're chewing skins to soften the leather," Ned told him. He went on to explain that the doeskin which Brad had admired for its velvety softness and pliability had attained those qualities by being chewed, inch by inch and for hours at a time, by the squaws and children.

The sight vastly amused the boy from Missouri. He would stand watching the strong teeth at work on strips and squares of the dried skin, marveling that human jaws could move so tirelessly. Now and then one of the children would look up to grin at the white man, but a hiss of warning from his mother

would make the endless grinding recommence.

“If you want to see real patience and skill, you ought to watch the manufacture of a Cheyenne war bonnet,” Ned told him. “Ever examine one closely? Come into the store-room and I’ll show you a beauty. It was given Bent by Old Tobacco, a chief that got his name because of his liking for the stuff.”

“Oh, I know Old Tobacco,” Brad exclaimed. “He’s that harmless old fellow who hangs around, begging bits of ‘chaw’ from everybody he can get to listen to him.”

Ned nodded, and the two crossed the court, and soon Brad was holding, perched on his fist, the gorgeous headdress of a Cheyenne chief.

“The foundation is, you see, the softest and finest strips of doeskin sewed together to form a cap. Then come the eagle feathers, fastened not only to the foundation but all down the long streamers that fall over the back. Do you see how cunningly those tufts

of white rabbit fur have been cemented to the middle of the feathers, giving a more ornamental effect? And look at the beadwork on the front—isn't it wonderful? ”

“ Do you suppose Indians can count? ” Brad inquired. “ They must—see! Here are four white beads, ten red, five blue on one side, and exactly the same number on the other. And what are these funny round things quilted among the beads? ”

“ Porcupine quills, dyed with vegetable juices. Think of the infinite patience it took to make this bonnet! I've heard that a squaw sometimes spends five years on one war bonnet for her man.”

“ They look frail, but I suppose they must be strong, to be used on the warpath.”

“ You bet they're strong,” the other said vigorously. “ That one you're holding was made for Old Tobacco in his youth, and he's well into his seventies now. What a tale it could tell of forays and massacres and fights with the Crows and Sioux, of scalps collected and booty taken! ”

“Ned, I want one of these bonnets,” Brad said abruptly. “I want to own one—to take it home when I go. Do you suppose I could buy one?”

“Buy? No! No Indian will sell his war bonnet, however attractive an offer is made for it.”

“How do you get them, then?”

“Two ways. One is to kill the wearer in battle and help yourself to his headgear. I don’t suppose that appeals to you? The other is to perform some unusual service to a chief which he may—only *may*, mind you! reward by the gift of one of his treasured bonnets. That’s how Bent came by this one. He saved Old Tobacco from the Kiowas a few years back, and the old fellow has been his friend ever since.”

“Is that why he shakes hands with Bent every morning?”

“Yes, he never neglects that little ceremony. He learned it on his first visit to the Fort and he’s proud as Punch over it. He’s rather a pet with the men here. He rides

out on the trail to meet every incoming train, and the trappers are always glad to see him, because they know they're practically home when his pony appears over the hill. They always give him a bit of tobacco for his pains."

Brad was to recall this conversation months later when tragedy overtook Old Tobacco, and his death was brought about by his very trust in his white friends.

Night closed down early at the Fort but it did not put a stop to the activities within. Bent encouraged whatever festivity was possible during the long winter. Fires burned both in the corral and in the *patio*, and until cold weather prevented, there were dancing and singing in both places until a late hour.

Charlotte and Rosalie were indeed the belles of these dances. They were importuned as partners by both white men and Mexicans. It was a ludicrous sight to see Charlotte, her ample skirts held high, jigging opposite a coffee-colored gallant in sugar-loaf hat and crimson-sashed waist who understood not a word of his partner's shouted in-

structions, but followed with lithe grace her every motion.

“Get your mouth-harp out,” Ned said one evening. “You haven’t played it for a long time.”

“There’s been too much to see and do,” Brad answered but he went obediently to his room and brought forth the harmonica.

Its strains were hailed with instant delight. Men crowded about the boy, asking for this tune, whistling that to see if he could play it. The Mexicans with their quick ear for music, soon learned every song in his modest repertoire.

One dolorous melody proved a special favorite.

She plucked me a flower with her lily-white hand,
A flow-er that faded and died.
And soon the fair loveliness that I adored,
Had drifted away on the tide.

Oh, sigh for sweet Mary,
So young and so fair,
A blossom the angels
In heaven will wear!

“ Jiggery Jones ” proved as popular in the Fort as it had been along the trail. Brad blessed the impulse which had made him bring along his harmonica.

Brad found the number of children within the Fort appalling. Even after the first snow flew, they ran about entirely naked, their copper-colored or tanned little bodies sliding between the hurrying men with practised ease. They seldom cried, and they seemed to possess from the very cradle an ability to look after themselves. Several times Brad was horrified to see one of these infants toddle out through the gates where coyotes perpetually loped about or sat on their haunches awaiting a chance bit of offal flung from within.

“ They’ll certainly be carried off,” he said one day, indignantly restoring to its mother one of these straying babes.

The slatternly half-breed women and the Mexicans took far less care of their offspring than did the full-blood squaws, who sometimes carried their children, even after they

were three years old, in the papoose case slung between their shoulders.

“Have you seen the ice-house yet?” Ned inquired one morning. “Haven’t? Then you’ve missed one of the sights of the Fort. Come along. I’ll—or no! I’ll ask Bill Bent if I can’t show you a little excitement on the way.”

He sought out the Fort’s owner, exchanged a few words with him and evidently received permission to do what he wished, for Brad saw the trader’s head nod assentingly.

Ned led the wondering boy to the southeast bastion and entered the small room beneath it. To all appearances, it was nothing more than a round enclosure, filled with baled hides at this season of the year when the pelts were coming in in great numbers. Ned produced a long, wide-bladed knife and with this instrument he proceeded to pry loose several of the adobe blocks which made the wall. To Brad’s amazement, a narrow passage was disclosed.

“You’ll have to crawl,” Ned directed.

“Down on your hands and knees, boy, and see how you’d have to get to your food if the Fort were surrounded.”

It was dark and breathless in the narrow passage, and more than once Brad wished that he had satisfied himself by a glance at the tunnel and then gone openly to the ice-house from the outside. In the course of time, however, Ned, who was in front of him, came to a stop and again plied his broad-bladed knife. This time the loose adobe formed an entrance to a large cave where Brad, after brushing the dust of the passage from his eyes, was able to see by the light of the candle Ned lighted, great carcasses hung about, sides of bacon and smoked hams, hundreds of dressed rabbits and prairie chickens laid in rows on shelves which had been built along the rows. The cave was of a temperature many degrees below the sharp December air outside. It bordered on the river, and Ned explained that when the water froze, great blocks of ice were hewn from it and piled into the cave.

Here was meat, Brad thought, to feed an army, yet Ned told him that the supply was low and that Carson and his men were expected every day now with the proceeds of their winter hunt.

“Over here are the delicacies,” Ned pointed out. “Buffalo tongues, rumps, and cleaned intestines. There’s no tame beef, you see, and not a great deal of pork. Bent tried to keep a herd of cows, but he couldn’t get anybody to milk ’em.”

“Not get anybody?” Brad’s surprise was great. “With a hundred men hanging about all the time, to say nothing of all the Indians—”

“Ever see an Indian milk a cow? No, I’ll bet you didn’t—nor ever will. Occasionally a squaw can be induced to do it, especially if she has a baby that needs to be fed, but a buck, never. And the trappers are as ignorant as children about the care of cattle. They won’t learn, either—think it’s beneath their dignity to do what they call farmer work. Bent had to butcher nearly all his cows finally,

and except for a couple he keeps in the corral and that Charlotte milks, the Fort gets along without milk.”

“ Or butter,” said Brad wryly. The lack of the fresh, sweet butter he had enjoyed in such abundance at home was a real deprivation to him.

“ Or butter. The men don’t mind. What they do crave, and get mighty little of, is sweetening in any form. Once in a while Charlotte and Andrew Green organize a candy pull, and the whole lot, trappers, Indians, Mexicans, and all, act like a lot of children over a holiday treat. Well, Brad, seen enough? Notice how cleverly this meat house is arranged? Its only opening—besides the tunnel, which mighty few know about—is toward the river, and with one man, armed and with plenty of ammunition, it could be defended for an hour against a whole tribe of Indians.”

“ Yes, but he might not have his gun,” Brad objected. “ Or his ammunition might give out.”

Ned smiled and, without speaking, indicated a cask of powder in the cave.

“Plenty there to repel an invasion! Bent would look out for that.”

“But isn’t it risky to leave all that powder in there—to say nothing of the meat? Don’t the Indians try to creep in here and steal the stuff during the night?”

“Open the door and look out,” Ned bade him.

Brad swung open the heavy door a trifle and at once his eye fell upon a sentry pacing back and forth between the river and the ice-house.

“Night and day that space is patrolled, and the Indians never know whether the sentry is alone or has five or six men hiding in the ice-house behind him. Bent purposely set traps for them in the beginning until he taught the Indians that this territory was beyond all hope of surprise.”

“There doesn’t seem to be a single thing he’s overlooked,” the boy observed thoughtfully. “It seems wonderful that he could

think it all out so carefully and keep his Fort safe down here so long."

"He had to think it out," was the significant answer. "There'd be nobody to come to his rescue if the Fort were rushed. You learned in school that an island is a small body of land completely surrounded by water. Well, Bent's Fort is a small body of whites completely surrounded by Indians. Half-way out into that river Mexican territory begins, and the Indians over there, to say nothing of the Mexicans themselves, are forever on the watch to surprise the Fort. The longer you stay down here, Brad, the more you'll admire William Bent!"

His words were prophetic, for every week of the Missouri visitor's stay brought fresh evidence of the wisdom and farsightedness of the founder of the Fort.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT was time for Kit Carson and his men to return from the first official hunt he was making for the Fort. The famous scout had spent varying lengths of time with Bent since he had helped construct the Fort, but now he had entered upon a contract with him to supply such meat as would be needed for the men who lived within the adobe walls.

“Two hunts a year’ll do it,” Bim Black opined. “Carson knows where the buffler air, better’n ary man alive.”

“What does he do between hunts?” Brad asked, his devouring curiosity concerning Carson forever suggesting new questions.

“Traps beaver. They cain’t no one beat Carson, come to beaver-trapping. I well recollect one time on the Wisdom River when Carson dammed a two-foot channel and made a pond ten mile wide. We let it stay a season,

and next year we took nigh on to three thousand beaver out o' that thar pond. We kept the Blackfeet squaws busy dressin' them skins, an' paid 'em with the carcasses of the animals."

"And sugar," put in a grizzled trapper who lounged near by, listening to Bim's tales. "A Blackfeet squaw'll sell her soul—always supposin' she's got one—for a pinch o' brown sugar."

Brad had convincing proof of this hunger for sweets on the night of Christmas Eve when a great candy-pull took place within the Fort.

All day the big black kettles had been kept aboil in the open court, their pungent fumes drawing so large a crowd of wistful onlookers that the portly Charlotte was hard put to it to make her way through them to stir the candy. The word had gone forth among the Cheyennes that sorghum was boiling, and so many visitors crowded in through the gates that at last Bent was obliged to order them closed and no more guests admitted.

Supper was a hurried meal, and Brad was amused to see that most of the trappers disappeared for a time, to return with hair slicked down with "bar's grease," and their finest doeskin jackets on in honor of the occasion.

As the dark sweetening boiled low in the kettles, a fresh supply was added, so that by eight o'clock the enormous pots were full to the brim with candy ready to be pulled. Charlotte presided over one of them, Andrew Green another, and Rosalie, the carpenter's wife, over the third. At Charlotte's solemnly given dictum, the pots were lifted from the fire and the dishing-out process begun.

Every man, woman, and child was provided with his own container. The white men used their deep tin plates, and howled with pain as the hot molasses made the dish uncomfortable to hold. The Indians brought pottery vessels, some of which would easily have held a gallon. Charlotte gave no heed to the size of the dish. Impartially she dipped up two great ladlefuls, and whether

they were nearly lost in the depths of the dish or ran over its shallow sides, it was all one to her.

Pandemonium reigned in the courtyard. Men shoved forward good-naturedly, Indians stolidly held their own places, squaws chattered and shrieked for their share. The children and dogs were everywhere, and Brad came to the rescue of more than one bronze mite whose dish had been snatched from him by the jaws of a hungry dog. It was no consolation to the victim that the robber yelped with pain as the hot candy burned his tongue. The papoose yelled, too, and Brad hastened to beg a fresh supply from Charlotte, whose special favorite he was by now.

For the most part, the white men did not bother to pull their candy. They waited until it was cool enough to handle and then devoured it as it was. The Mexicans and Indians, however, pulled it deftly, and soon long ropes of yellowish taffy were ready for the eating.

“Shame on you, Bim,” Brad reproached

the veteran as he came upon him earnestly addressing himself to his share. "Why don't you pull yours—show 'em how it's done?"

Bim's answer came through a mass of the soft candy. "Feller, the only thing that's more unsartain than life down here at the Fort is any kind o' sweetenin'. If you want to keep yores, you got to eat it pronto, and that's gospel truth. If you tarry—thar! what'd I tell you?"

Brad made an ineffective clutch after his own dish, but the young Indian boy who had snatched it ran away laughing. Charlotte had seen the theft and came up, towering with wrath.

"Dem Injuns steal ebert'ing they git hands on," she said, scowling so fiercely at a magnificently attired brave who stood grinning near by that he slunk away abashed. "Come ober hyar, Marse Brad, an' Charlotte see you gits yo' share."

"Like it, Brad?" Bent asked, stopping before the boy.

“ I should think so! ” said the boy eagerly. “ I didn’t know how hungry I was for something sweet until I got my teeth in this.”

Soon a blissful silence descended upon the court. Little family groups withdrew with their booty and faces were smeared to the ears with the delectable confection. The most dignified of the chiefs gravely licked each copper-hued finger in an effort to capture the last elusive taste.

When the kettles were emptied, a swarm of young Indian lads descended upon them, and a few greedy spirits actually crawled inside, licking vigorously as they progressed. There was plenty for all, however, and when bedtime came more than three hundred sticky, happy Christmas celebrants retired, blissfully replete with molasses candy.

There were other recognitions of the holiday, Brad discovered the next morning.

“ How’s your voice to-day? ” Ned inquired of his nephew at breakfast. “ I hope you got it well sweetened last night, for we’re going to need it to-day.”

“What for?” Brad demanded curiously.

“Singing. It’s Christmas, boy! We’re going to have a service this morning.”

“A Christmas service—down here?”

“Why not—down here? All the more, down here, it seems to me. We have to show the Indians and the Mexicans how we celebrate our holidays.”

“The Mexicans hold a celebration of their own,” Bent put in. “You must be sure to see that, too.”

By ten o’clock, snow was falling too heavily to permit of an open-air service, but Bent herded everybody into the long clerks’ room at the west end of the Fort. There were no seats, but many sat cross-legged on the floor, while a fringe of others stood about the walls.

To Brad’s vast astonishment, it was Ned who took charge of the service. He mounted a box at one end of the room and motioned the bugler to signal for silence. That the company was well used to this celebration was evident by the immediate and respectful attention.

“Everybody sing!” said Ned. “All together now!”

“‘O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant—’”

The volume of sound which was suddenly loosed into that adobe-walled room was astounding. The trappers joined in lustily, evidently perfectly familiar with both words and music. The Mexicans gave clear and musical support to the hymn. The Indians for the most part contented themselves with a series of syncopated grunts, save as now and then a buck would grow excited by the rapidly increasing sounds and let out a shrill whoop of approval or dissent, it was difficult to tell which.

An effort had been made to exclude the dogs, but a few of them had slipped in, and they threw back their heads and howled in sympathy. Their friends outside took up the chorus and the noise was deafening.

At first Brad shook with laughter at the Bent's Fort idea of a Christmas hymn; then

he became aware, in a boy's vague but none the less accurate manner of assimilating impressions, of the thrilling power of it all: bearded mountaineers singing words they had learned in their youth; Mexicans caroling a song taught them by their own black-robed priests; Indians courteously, if unmusically, joining their voices in praise of the white man's Great Spirit; even the flea-ridden curs involuntarily increasing what was, after all, the instinctive homage every living thing pays to the Maker of heaven and earth.

The hymn was followed by a brief story of the nativity, told by Bent himself. He told it in English, but translated it as he went along into Spanish and Indian. Deep nods of recognition marked each point of the story. Evidently this yearly narrative lingered in the minds of the audience; perhaps it was discussed in the interval between.

After Bent's contribution, the bugle sounded once more and the company sang "The Star Spangled Banner." The high notes proved too much for the Indians, but

the clear voices of the Mexicans soared above those of the Americans, and the trappers were forced to own that the “furreners,” as they designated the men beyond the border, made of the national anthem a thing of tonal beauty.

At the end of the singing, the cannon outside the Fort was discharged in the Christmas salute, and the congregation: dogs, babies, Indians, Mexicans, and trappers, was dismissed.

Dinner was a feast. Charlotte and Andrew Green, with their Mexican helpers, had been busy for days in its preparation. Great roasts of buffalo meat and venison were flanked by pies whose flaky crusts covered a score of tender prairie chicken. Wild turkeys brought in by the most expert of the hunters were roasted and stuffed with onion-seasoned breadcrumbs.

There were stacks of “Bent’s biscuit,” that culinary invention of William Bent’s during a season of famine which had later become so popular that Charlotte and Andrew spent

their spare time in its manufacture for trade as the spring train went forth to Independence.

And there were—pumpkin pies! Golden, melting, spicily pungent pumpkin pies such as only dusky Charlotte could make. Brad had seen the great piles of yellow fruit which Bent obtained each year from a rancher in Mexico. The sweetening was molasses, and the spices were more carefully measured than gold dust would have been, but surely, Brad thought, as he passed his plate for a third luscious quarter, no food was ever made which was more thoroughly satisfying to a hungry boy than a Bent's Fort pumpkin pie!

“Too bad Kit didn't get here for this,” Bent remarked. “He's overdue.”

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than a tremendous uproar at the east gates made him spring up and slap his buckskinned hip.

“There he is now! There's old Kit, a little late for dinner, but come to spend Christmas with us, as he promised!”

Everybody streamed out into the courtyard and crowded about the returning scout and his hunters. Twenty of them had accompanied him on this trip and they stood about, grinning at the vociferous welcome they were receiving. Behind them was a string of pack ponies, heavily laden with meat which was cleaned and dressed in readiness for the ice-house.

“ Here I am, Bill,” Kit greeted his employer. “ Said I’d be here for Christmas, and here I am. Got any grub left? If Charlotte ain’t saved me a punkin pie, I shore don’t aim to give her the fofurraw I brought her all the way from the ’Rapahoe winter camp! ”

CHAPTER NINE

“WELL, young feller, what do you think of the Fort?” Carson turned away from his shaving-mirror and lathered his chin with a brush whose strange appearance caught Brad’s eyes. “Looking at my rope brush, are you?” The scout chuckled and held it out for Brad to see. It was made of a stout bit of hempen rope, one end frayed to the depth of an inch and bound by threads to form the “brush.” A large knot in the other end served as handle.* “Been a mighty useful bit of furniture, I’m here to tell you.”

Brad asked a question which had been on his lips many times since the Carson men arrived at the Fort.

“Why is it that you and all your hunters

* This brush may be seen to-day in the Historical Museum at Denver, along with many articles of Carson’s attire, and a block of the wool-mixed adobe from the ruins of Bent’s Fort.

shave nearly every day, and the other trappers grow beards? I should think it would be an awful lot of trouble to you!”

“ Trouble? I should say it is trouble,” Kit grumbled. “ But there’s a reason—a mighty good reason for it, too. It’s one of Bill Bent’s little ways of keeping friends with the Indians. They don’t like beards, you know. Ever see a bearded Injun? So Bent makes his own trappers go clean-shaven, and that helps smooth the way for the fur-tradin’; savvy? ”

Brad savvied, his admiration daily growing for the man whose diplomacy had made the Fort, set in the very heart of hostile Indian country, not only a place of safety for the white man, but a council ground for the redskins themselves.

“ How’d you like the Fort, I was askin’ you,” Carson said again, dipping his rope brush in the mug of soft soap he had begged from Charlotte. “ Come up to your expectations, does it? ”

“ It sure does,” Brad replied with boyish

enthusiasm. "Only one thing——" He paused, not quite daring to put his wish into words.

"Spit it out, kid," Carson advised kindly. "I kinda think I know what it is you want to say, too. You're itchin' and dyin' to go out on a buffler hunt for yourself, ain't that it?"

"That's it!" Brad's eagerness overrode his hesitation. "It's mighty nice here at the Fort—exciting, too, in a way—but it's kind of hard, seeing the hunting parties set out day after day and come in again with deer and buffalo and bear, and me not getting half a mile away from the gates!"

"What's the matter with Ned Hundley?" Carson was scraping his chin with a well-sharpened hunting knife. "He don't usually sit around the fire all winter, counting bales and figuring profits. Ain't he going out before spring?"

Brad answered disconsolately. "He's going over into Mexico for Mr. Bent, and they won't hear of my going along. I reckon I could give as good an account of myself as

anybody,” Brad complained. “I’m sixteen, I can shoot, I know which Indians are hostile and which aren’t—”

“Do you, now?” Carson drawled. “S’pose you tell me. Go on—speak your piece like a good little boy.”

The twinkle in his eye took the sting from his obvious doubt of Brad’s newly acquired knowledge.

“The Cheyennes are always friendly to the white man. They’ve never killed any of them except by accident. The Crows and Sioux are friendly when they have a peace treaty with the Cheyennes, hostile if they haven’t. The Arapahoes—they’re the best Indians of all, *I* think. Their voices are clear, not thick and choky like the Kiowas and the Osages. The Comanches—”

Carson had been holding his left cheek taut for the scrape of his knife. Now he let it go and spoke explosively.

“*Nice*, are they? The ’Rapahoes? What blamed mulligan’s been filling you up with lies like that? The ’Rapahoes are devils, with

horns and all, complete. The most ornery, treacherous devils that ever come down from the north to powwow in pretended peace. Give me six Kiowas to fight any time in place of one dod-gasted 'Rapahoe! Even the Pawnees—"

"Oh, I know the Pawnees are always unfriendly," Brad put in eagerly.

Carson smiled his slow, one-sided smile. "Unfriendly—is that what you call it? That's a purty mild word for the Pawnees. Why, kid, not a man alive can remember a peace with the Pawnees. They're a wild, fightin', killin', reasonless set of locoed bobcats, and my advice to anybody that gits in reach of 'em is to git out again as quick and far as possible!"

"Comanches are pretty bad, too!" Brad spoke out of his still vivid memory of an encounter with that tribe.

Carson snapped his fingers to show his contempt for the Comanches.

"Fat, bow-legged rascals, never off their horses long enough to know what their feet

was meant for. They love to play tricks on each other and make jokes, and they're the worst horse-thieves this side of the Platte. . . . I'll tell you another reason why the Pawnees are bad," he harked back. "They're the only tribe that fights with guns altogether, now. 'Rapahoes stick to their lances and arrows, and Kiowas and Comanches use a few guns—all they can get. But somehow or other, spite o' Bent's trying to keep any Injun from getting a white man's gun, the Pawnees always have all the rifles and ammunition they want. An' a hell-raisin' Pawnee, with a good horse under him and a United States rifle in his hand is nothing safe to monkey with, young Brad. You can put that in your clay pipe and smoke on it a long time, and still not git the true flavor of it till you see some of them red fiends in action."

"How about the Apaches?"

"Lousy, and great on yelling fit to scare the daylights out of you, but yellow-livered cowards if you rush 'em hard," was the scornful verdict of the great Indian fighter.

“ Well, now about this hunting trip you crave to take. You know that kid I got with me—Blue, I call him? ”

“ Yes, I know Blue. He was herder for the cavvy in the train I came down with,” Brad said eagerly. “ He and I have been having a great chin over his adventures on the trail with you.” Brad’s voice grew suddenly wistful. The fifteen-year-old lad who had left Captain Blunt’s employ to work for Carson had poured out many a tale of his life at Taos since the two boys had parted. Brad had liked him from the first.

“ Pretty promisin’ kid,” Kit commented. “ I took him along on this last hunting trip and he give a good account of himself for a greenhorn. I’m thinking of sending him out with a couple of men to do a little beaver trapping for me. Nothing dangerous, except as any winter trip near the mountains—”

“ The mountains! ” cried Brad longingly. “ Oh, Mr. Carson—well, Kit, then—couldn’t I go with him? It just seems to me I can’t

be this close to the mountains and not see them before I go back to St. Joseph!"

"I was kind of working around to that," the other admitted. "It'll be cold, you know," he warned the excited boy. "You'll half freeze most nights. And the grub is about what you make it, huntin'. You'll have to shoot nearly everything you eat, 'cause you'll have to travel light. It ain't no great shucks of a trip I'm planning, but still if you'd like to go—"

There could be no question of Brad's wanting to go. His eyes were ablaze with excitement, he could hardly refrain from wringing Carson's hand in sheer gratitude. The scout's eyes twinkled, and he made short work of finishing his toilet by brushing his hair with a wooden-backed brush brought from "the States."

"Come on down, then, and we'll see what Bill Bent has to say about it."

"Ned, you mean, don't you? It'll be Ned's permission I'll have to get, I suppose."

Carson, halfway down the adobe steps,

paused and looked at the other sharply over his shoulder.

“ No, son, I don’t mean Ned Hundley. I mean Bill Bent, like I said. This is his Fort, and he’s boss here, first, last, an’ all the time. What he says goes, and don’t you never forget it. He ain’t run this place practically single-handed for the last three years—the St. Vrain being north most of the time and his own brothers otherwise occupied—without learnin’ that there can’t be but one boss of an outfit, whether it’s an army, a trappin’ trip, a city, or a fort. If he says you’re to go with Blue to the mountains, go you will—and Ned Hundley knows a heap better than to dispute it. If he says you ain’t to go, you might as well wipe yore tears with your pocket handkerchief, for nothin’ will budge him.”

Thus warned, Brad awaited in breathless suspense the decision of the Fort’s owner. Carson neither pleaded his cause nor minimized the danger of the expedition. He simply said:

“ Bill, I’m sending that kid I’m trainin’ out on a trip after beaver by hisself. That is, he’s taking only a couple of half-breeds with him, and he’s in command. Brad here thinks it’d do his constitution a heap of good to go along; seems to crave a whiff of mountain air after smellin’ your Mexican cook-pots for so long. How about it? ”

“ What’s the idea, Kit? Testing the boy out? ”

“ Which boy? ” Carson grinned.

“ Yours. We’ve had pretty convincing proof here that Brad’s all right,” Bent said kindly, making the boy’s heart bound high with pleasure.

Bent asked a few questions: where was Blue bound, how long would the expedition last, etc. Brad observed that he did not inquire into Blue’s fitness for such a trip. Evidently he took it for granted that if Carson was sending him, Carson believed in his capabilities.

At the short, succinct answers he received, Bill Bent nodded.

“Brad’s a good shot,” he said. “Soft, just now, of course, because he’s been cooped up here for over a month; but he’ll do.” Without further comment he turned away and Brad was in doubt as to whether or not he had received permission to go on the trip. Carson put an immediate end to his doubts by saying:

“Go hunt up the kid and tell him you’re signed on. He’ll know what you ought to take. I suppose you’ll ride your own horse?”

“Greased Lightning? Why, Kit, that horse is—”

“All right.” The subject of Lightning’s perfections was dismissed curtly.

Brad thought, with mortification, that he would never grow used to the alternate talkativeness and curtness of these trappers. Over their pipes and after a meal they would grow expansive, reeling off long yarns of the things they had done, the sights they had seen. When business was afoot, they grew sparing of words, a nod, a jerked thumb, a

grunt often serving the purpose of explanation.

Carson, in particular, was laconic. Expert in the use of the Indian sign language, he sometimes passed an entire day without speaking more than a few sentences, his agile fingers communicating his thoughts in silence.

But Brad had small time to reflect over this trait in the hunter's character. He found Blue in the corral, inspecting the saddle-packs he was to take on the journey.

The boy was solemnly happy under his new honors. He realized that Carson was testing him by putting him in charge of the expedition, and he was determined to prove himself worthy of his brief authority.

He nodded, in patent imitation of his hero, at Brad's news; gave brief directions as to what would be needed, and promised to speak to the chief clerk about supplying Brad with those necessities. Then he turned back to the matter in hand with the effect of dismissing Brad entirely, and Brad, grinning at the

change between the young runaway in charge of the cavvy and the important hunter preparing his party for a dangerous expedition, went to find Ned and tell him the great news.

CHAPTER TEN

THE thrill of that first hunt!

The boys did their best to appear entirely casual about it, but when, on the second day of January, 1838, they rode their horses out of the east gate and set out toward the mountains, followed by their two half-breed companions and pack horses laden with food and blankets, their hearts were beating high with excitement.

To all intents and purposes, they were on their own. Their companions, Carlos and Juan, while experienced men, lacked those traits of leadership which already had manifested themselves in the two boys. The half-breeds would take orders from Blue, and Brad would confer with his friend in any emergency.

The day was fiercely cold, but very little

snow had fallen near the Fort. As they neared the mountains, the drifts would be formidable, Carson had warned them, and each of the party had a pair of snowshoes strapped to his saddlebow.

“Any special place we’re headed for?” Brad asked nonchalantly when the day was half spent. “For to-night, I mean?”

“There’s a water hole about twenty-five miles from the Fort. We have to chart our way by water, of course, until there’s more snow than this.”

“Twenty-five miles? Is that all we’re to do to-day? I thought of course we’d make thirty.”

“Got the pack horses to consider,” young Blue rejoined. “They’re loaded heavy, and we got to keep ’em in good condition to bring back the beaver.”

“Isn’t it pretty late to go after beaver? Supposing the streams are frozen over, what can we do then?”

“They won’t be yet,” Blue answered confidently. “And beaver fur’s prime this time

of year. Kit told me a squaw-dressed skin'll bring as high as six dollars in St. Joe."

"You figuring on finding squaws to dress 'em—where we're going?"

The boy nodded. "Plenty of 'Rapahoes at the foot of the mountains where we're headed. One of them big sacks on the horses is filled with sugar; big fat lumps of it, straight from Noorleans. The squaws'll do anything on earth for you, if you offer 'em sugar."

They made camp that night at the water hole Blue had spoken of. Both were stiff from a long day in the saddle and hungry enough to do full justice to the griddle bread and buffalo stew the half-breeds prepared for them. After they had eaten until they could eat no more, the boys spread their blankets in a sheltered spot with their feet toward the fire, which must be kept burning all night, both for warmth and for protection from wild animals, and lost no time in falling asleep.

Brad was wakened by a feeling of intense cold. The fire had died down to embers, the

wind had changed, and the protection of the blankets which had seemed ample the night before now offered little warmth. Drugged with sleep, he struggled to forget his discomfort; but at last he left his bed and piled fresh fuel on the fire. In a few minutes it was crackling merrily and Brad, warmed through, thought to return to his blankets and resume his interrupted slumbers.

“Time to eat,” Carlos announced, coming up behind him.

“To eat? Say, what you talking about? It’s the middle of the night. Why, look! It’s pitch-dark yet.”

The other shook his head. “Carlos smell the morning,” he declared. He busied himself about the fire, Juan bringing water from the stream. Blue came, cold and yawning, from his blankets, and by the time the late-rising sun had peeped over the horizon, the party of four was several miles on its way.

The plains at the foot of the mountains were reached in ten days’ travel, and except for a bruised foot Juan had suffered when a

limb he was chopping fell upon him, all were well and in good spirits.

When the river which was their destination was reached, Blue modestly relinquished command of the expedition to his more experienced helpers. They went to work systematically.

A natural dam in the stream had formed a pond, and for two days all hands were busy removing this obstruction.

It was a task which sorely tried the endurance of the two boys. Even though they were equipped with boots of hip length, the icy water of the river chilled them through and through. Their hands, despite their heavy gloves, grew numb with handling the large stones. Again and again they were obliged to retire to the fire which was kept going on the bank, and warm themselves before they could resume work.

“Pretty dam cold,” Carlos commented, apparently unconscious of his pun. “Soon be through now—to-night maybe.”

So it proved. By dusk the last barrier had

been removed and the water was draining from the pond the dam had formed.

“ By morning it’ll be almost dry,” Brad said with satisfaction. “ Then we can——”

“ Morning? ” Juan wagged his head in derisive negation. “ Beaver be gone in de morning. We get him to-night! ”

“ To-night? But we can’t see to-night! There’s no moon. How are we going to hunt beaver at night? ”

“ Juan show you,” that individual commented.

The boys watched the preparations with interest. Fires were built on both banks of the pond, their flames lighting up the scene with a fantastic glow. Armed with stout clubs all four then waded in and in less than an hour forty-two animals were piled upon the bank, a record even for that day and place.

“ It seems a shame to kill ’em,” Brad said regretfully, stroking the handsome fur. “ They’re kind of like people, with their little town all by themselves that they made.”

“ Their skins keep people warm,” Blue of-

ferred. "And this way's a lot less cruel than traps—you got to remember that." Then his boyish pride and glee in the achievement came uppermost. "Forty-two at one time, Brad! Ain't that a haul for any hunter to be proud of! Say, won't Kit be pleased when we show him these prime skins? Not a kitten among 'em, either."

"Where's your 'Rapahoe squaws to dress 'em?" Brad demanded.

"Over there." Blue nodded to the northwest. "There's a settlement about thirty miles from here."

"Thirty miles? Do we have to pack all these beavers thirty miles?"

Carlos forestalled the explanation. "We skin she first—then pack him to de Injun."

"Skin forty-two beaver to-morrow?" Brad said in dismay. "Why, it'll take us all day!"

"Not to-morrow!" The half-breed's grin came again. "To-night—still to-night. We skin she while it a leetle warm."

And to Brad's disgust they did just that.

By the light of the fires which Carlos kept blazing, the four removed the handsome coats from all the animals, Carlos and Juan removing four apiece to the boys' one. There was a knack to the process which Blue acquired more quickly than his friend, and soon he could nearly if not quite equal the half-breeds' skill.

The task seemed interminable. Already tired by a long day's work with the removal of the dam, they had put forth effort in the slaughter of the beavers. Now with limbs aching and eyes which closed occasionally in spite of the boys' best efforts, they were obliged to wield the long sharp skinning-knives, their hands numb with cold as the bodies stiffened. Occasionally Carlos or Juan stopped to make a pot of coffee and the hot, strong fluid revived the boys temporarily; but when dawn came and the last pelt had been removed and placed in a bundle with the others, the young hunters were practically asleep on their feet. Carlos allowed them a few hours of rest, then roused them to par-

take of the hearty meal which combined breakfast and dinner for them.

“ I suppose we’d better make a start for the ‘Rapahoe camp to-day,” Blue commented as he finished the last slab of griddle bread. “ Then we can make it by to-morrow night easy.”

Carlos, however, shook his head.

“ I think eet snow,” he declared, pointing toward the north. “ More better we hurry a leetle, make camp to-night for long time.”

Even to the boys’ inexperienced eyes, it was evident that a storm was brewing in the mountains. The sky was overcast, and the peaks on which the sun had shone so brightly yesterday were now blotted out. The little camp broke up with as much haste as it was possible to make.

By this time some of their stores had been used and it was possible, though it made a heavy load, to bind the bundles of green skins on the pack horses. The speed was greatly decreased, of course, and they were but eight miles on their journey when night fell.

“She snow to-night,” Juan predicted, sniffing the air. “She snow dam hard.”

And snow she did, at first in a wild flurry which the boys hoped would spend itself, later coming down with a businesslike directness which boded ill for to-morrow’s journey.

Dawn—if the pallid lightening in the east which was all they were to see of the sun for several days could be called dawn—found them completely blocked off from the trail. A high wind had blown since midnight and the snow lay in drifts already some five feet in depth, with the storm still raging.

“Hadn’t we better push on before it gets worse?” Brad asked. “This may last for days.”

Blue also was in favor of making the attempt, but the two half-breeds negatived the idea emphatically.

“More better us stay here,” Carlos said. “One fine camp here. Might get los’ ourselves if us try to go on.”

The “fine camp” consisted of a little group of hemlock-trees, their twisted branches giv-

ing mute evidence of the years they had withstood similar storms. There was a small stream near by, though its waters had frozen before night fell.

Carlos and Juan set to work composedly to prepare more permanent quarters than had yet been required. With their short-handled axes they chopped branches from the hemlocks and built a sort of hut with the boles of the trees for tent-poles. Outside of the branch walls they heaped snow, packing it down until it was firm and hard. When the little shelter was finished, the boys were surprised to find how warm and comfortable it was. They lent a hand in clearing the ground inside, and when more branches had been cut and their blankets spread over them, they had beds which were, as Brad said, "the last touch of elegance in our arctic home."

The fire was built just outside the hut. Fortunately for them, there was no scarcity of fuel. In places where the wind had swept the ground clear of snow, wood from the hemlocks lay in great quantities, and the half-

breeds worked earnestly to gather it and pile it within reach of the hut. At any minute the wind might change, and all available fuel be hidden by the snow.

The horses had not been forgotten. Juan picketed them under the trees, in the lee of the hut. It was interesting to see how the sagacious creatures kept the fire and the shelter of the branches between themselves and the blizzard. There was little food for them, but by melting huge quantities of snow in their kettles, the boys were able to give them plenty of water, which the animals drank gratefully.

At dinner-time Juan and Carlos served what the boys considered decidedly niggardly quantities of food. A little reflection, however, showed them that it was necessary to conserve their supplies, at least until they could obtain fresh meat.

“Deer to-morrow,” Juan promised them, grinning.

“How can you tell?”

“Juan see tracks——” He gestured widely toward the north.

The party slept more comfortably that night than any since they had left the Fort. The hemlock beds were deliciously soft, the snow walls kept them warm, and the howling of the blizzard outside made music for a lullaby.

“It’s clear to-day!” Blue shouted when he stuck his head out of the shelter. “Hurrah! We can go on.”

But Carlos would not hear to it. “She snow some more,” he said, again with a nod toward the range of mountains which could be seen shining like freshly frosted wedding cakes in the distance. “More better we get deer.”

Nothing could suit either boy better than a prospect of a hunt, and after a sparing breakfast they strapped on their snowshoes and set forth, leaving Carlos and Juan to guard the camp.

Blue justified Carson’s faith in his ability as a hunter by pausing a few yards away to get his bearings.

“Won’t do to get lost out here,” he said.

“ We’ll work to the south in a straight line. That’ll be easier to keep track of than a zig-zag course.”

“ Why can’t we find our way back by our own trail? ” Brad demanded, pointing to the parallel marks of their snowshoes.

“ Can—if it stays clear. Five minutes’ snow would cover our tracks completely.”

Brad, to his vast delight and pride, was the first to bring down game, a fine young deer which was all he could do to lug home. Blue had little luck, a buck rabbit and a couple of prairie chickens being all that he bagged. However, the camp now had meat enough to last it for some days. Nothing, Brad Hundley thought, ever had tasted so good as the steaks Carlos broiled over the coals that night. The tender deer meat was salted with strips of cured bacon used sparingly, and eaten with the griddle bread the half-breed knew how to make so deliciously. And the fact that it was his own gun which had brought down the animal gave the meat a special savor to the boy.

By sundown the snow recommenced.

Down from the far high peaks the storm hurled itself, the wind shaking the hemlock-trees in fury, battering at the frail shelter which held the four human beings in this deserted world. The horses stood with hanging heads, silently enduring a discomfort they were powerless to lessen.

Brad had brought his harmonica with him and for a time he played over the favorites which the others demanded. But the shrill strains of the man-made instrument seemed an affront to the mighty diapason of the wind, and soon he put it away and went to bed, where he and Blue slept as only healthy boyhood can sleep, their blankets covering their heads, their dreams being of beaver hunts and Indian fights and long journeys along the trail.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE skin lodges of the Arapahoe village gleamed white against the dark pines. Dazzling snow beneath, dazzling peaks above, and the white tepees—it almost blinded the boys as they rode up the trail. Behind them came Carlos and Juan and behind them in turn, the pack-ponies.

Six days had gone by since the little party had been halted by the storm; six days in which the patience and resourcefulness of the young hunters had been tried to the utmost. At last the storm abated, the sun shone again, and Carlos pronounced it the moment for departure.

“It’s like wading through some of our Missouri mud,” Brad exclaimed, as his horse’s feet went down and down and were pulled free from the snow with a visible effort. The

boys on their snowshoes fared better, but they could make no speed on account of the horses they led.

Brad went ahead, leading Greased Lightning, and breaking a trail in the shining surface for the others. Fortunately the snow had not yet acquired a heavy crust, which the boys dreaded for the cuts it would inflict on the horses' forelegs. Blue followed, leading his sorrel, and after him came Carlos and Juan and the pack horses, reined together in a string. Thus the more heavily burdened animals had a comparatively clear trail to follow, but even so, their progress was slow, and it was the evening of the second day after they had left camp when they came in sight of the Indian village.

"I've always wanted to see how Indians live in winter," the Missouri boy said. "Somehow you always think of them as belonging to the summer, eating and sleeping almost altogether outdoors. I want to see how they manage, without stoves and real houses, when it gets below zero."

“ Ain’t there Injuns where you come from? ”

“ Plenty of ’em,” Brad answered. “ But they’re Sacs and Foxes and Ioways—and they imitate the white man as much as they can. They’re always taking possession of an old hut or house somewhere and crowding into it, as many as they can get, for the winter. And now, of course, since the Platte Purchase, they have their own houses—a store and a school, too! on the Government reservation.”

Brad’s curiosity was soon satisfied. Carson had supplied the boys with a “ sign message ” to the Arapahoe chief of the village, a package which contained, besides the gifts which were sent as a matter of courtesy, a peace pipe, signifying the pacific intentions of the bearers, a silver bracelet on which various emblems were inscribed, which apparently carried their own significance to the Indians, and a long scarlet feather, the meaning of which was unknown to the boys until the chief explained to them, partly by signs

and partly by words interpreted by Carlos, that it was the "blood token" between the Arapahoes and Carson.

"My brother at Taos sends greeting to his brother, One-Who-Kills-Bears-with-His-Arms," the chief made oration. "My brother knows how friendly are the Arapahoes with the whites, and how welcome are the young men he sends. As swift as the eagle, as truly-to-be-counted-on as the coming of the spring, as kind as the summer sun—these are the Arapahoes. My brother at Taos knows all this, and proves his faith in the Arapahoes by sending his young hunters to us. Thus it is written on the bracelet he sent."

When this was interpreted to them, both boys had much ado to suppress their grins. They were remembering Carson's last words to them concerning the Arapahoes:

"The doggone skunks are afraid of me, and they'll think twice before they'll meddle with any messengers I send: Just the same, mind what I told you about them 'Rapahoes.

You can trust 'em just as far as you can sling a cat—providin' the cat is a wild 'un and yore arm is powerful weak. Just that far and no farther. Keep yore eyes peeled every minute you're with 'em."

This far from reassuring advice recurred to Brad now as he found himself being ushered ceremoniously into the largest lodge, the home of the chief. Nevertheless, he was deeply interested in this winter home of an Arapahoe chief.

The tepee was much larger than any he had ever seen before, some thirty-five feet in circumference. Its sides were supported by poles driven into the ground and a center pole raised the sewn skins to a comfortable height. Against the walls were stretched a series of cowskins, their smooth surfaces covered with paintings in crude colors. Afterwards Brad learned that these comprised the history of the chief, his deeds of valor, his illnesses, his periods of warfare, all set forth in picture language.

"And take a look at the beds!" Blue ex-

claimed in an awe-stricken whisper. "Ain't that real luxury for you?"

End to end lay the buffalo-skin couches, neat mats of peeled willow rods at their head and foot. Over the couches were spread superb furs of bear, fox, and wolf.

From the lodge-poles hung cases of buckskin which contained the family wardrobe, the boys knew. Brad gained some idea of the painstaking labor which went into these garments when he was shown a tiny waistcoat made for a child of three, its entire surface worked in an elaborate pattern of beads and dyed porcupine quills, its edges finished with a care and beauty which would have done credit to the best tailor in New York City.

Two fires provided warmth and the cooking arrangements for the lodge. They provided smoke, too, its acrid fumes making the boys' eyes and throats smart continually. The Indians did not seem to be inconvenienced in the least by it, and openly laughed at their guests' sufferings.

Carlos conducted the business of getting

the beaver skins dressed with the utmost simplicity. He and Juan opened the great bundles of green fur, extracted a handful of brown sugar from the sack and made the squaws understand that for each skin they dressed a similar amount of sugar would be given.

“ And look at ’em crowd! ” Blue said joyously. “ Say, at this rate we’ll get them skins dressed pronto! ”

The squaws indeed were pushing forward in eager proffer of their services. They jabbered excitedly and made queer motions with their hands which so amused the boys that they burst out laughing.

“ They show how to dress the beaver verree fine, verree queek,” Carlo’s explained. “ See—now they take out the scraping-knife; and now they salt the hide—so! She is better to do so than each the other.”

The pantomime was at first too rapid for the boys’ unaccustomed eyes but after a while they were able to follow the various processes of preparing the skins, as evidenced by the

quickly flying fingers of the eager women. Carlos and Juan dealt out the skins impartially. The nearest bronze hand received the forthcoming pelt until all had been given out and forty-two fortunate recipients went busily to work.

During the day, the boys lounged about the village, learning much of the musical-voiced, tall savages. Almost they were indignant with Carson for his adverse opinion of them. They were friendly, hospitable, apparently transparent in their natures.

The chief, One-Who-Kills-Bears-with-His-Arms, himself led a party of braves into the mountains on an antelope hunt for the entertainment of the guests. At the close of each evening meal, the peace pipe was ceremonially passed, a compliment with which Brad, for one, could have cheerfully dispensed.

Gifts were constantly being exchanged between the whites and their hosts. The chief coveted the leather belt with steel buckle which Brad wore and when the boy good-naturedly took it off and presented it to him,

the grave thanks of the chief were made more substantial by the gift of a pair of handsomely embroidered moccasins.

The boys were interested to learn the origin of the name of their host.

His previous title, they discovered, had been Very-Long-Arms, a portent, had the owner of the limbs in question but known it, of a significant event to come. This was the tale he told the boys, with many gestures and by the help of Carlos whose dark face shone in the light of the evening fire.

Many years ago Very-Long-Arms had come, unexpectedly and alone, face to face with a grizzly bear, just going into hibernation. The animal was dull with the beginning of his long stupor, but not too dull to recognize an enemy who had sprung up in his path, no less to the bear's astonishment than to his own.

Long-Arms was too close to the animal to have room to draw his bow. He fumbled for his hunting-knife, but with a lightning swoop the bear gathered him into a fierce and hairy

embrace, almost crushing the breath from the body of the unlucky Indian.

There was but one thing to do and Very-Long-Arms did it. Round that clumsy body he wound his own arms, and a contest of endurance began. The bear had the advantage of superior strength, but the Indian's arms were longer and so obtained a greater purchase on his bearship. The redskin felt several of his ribs cracking under the terrific pressure. His breath was almost spent, his face was dark with congested blood, when suddenly the huge form in his arms relaxed, and the bear tumbled over, dead.

So at least was the story Very-Long-Arms brought back to the encampment, and for proof he had not only his bruised body and broken ribs, but the skin of the bear itself. He had lingered, for all his pain, to remove the magnificent pelt, and now it covered the very bed on which the chief stretched himself at night. And since that time he had been known as One-Who-Kills-Bears-with-His Arms.

“How much of all that do you believe, Brad?” Blue inquired in a whisper. “Sounds like a whopper to me.”

It was not likely that the chief understood the words, but the open incredulity on Blue's face was easy to read. At any rate, the chief suddenly threw his arms about the boy's thin body and gathered him in a bone-breaking embrace. Blue had not breath to yell. Brad, believing at first from the grin on the Indian's face, that the incident was a joke, nevertheless looked on a little uneasily.

It was Carlos, coming up suddenly from behind, who realized Blue's danger. Unexpectedly the chief felt the cold muzzle of a gun poked into his body and at once relaxed his grasp of the bruised and breathless boy.

“Funnee work!” he said, out of his scant English. “Boy laugh ha-ha!”

“Can't say I see the funny side of it,” Brad told him, scowling. “And I reckon Blue isn't feeling much like ha-ha-ing, you old bear-hugger! Why, you pretty near killed him! If——”

Carlos' hand came down warningly on his shoulder.

"No make chief angree," he said. "Be careful!"

Brad was sensible enough to realize the need for caution. They were four against the Indian's many scores of friends, and though the fear of Carson and the expediency of keeping peace with the white man restrained them, the Arapahoes were capable of pushing both reasons aside if they were angered.

"Did he 'most kill you, Blue?" Brad asked sympathetically, as they both withdrew to the bed they occupied in the lodge. There was, of course, no privacy whatever within the tepee. The chief and his entire family, numbering some dozen or more, slept within, and it was only after they were snuggled down under their robes that the boys could exchange any words without their faces being searched for a clue to their meaning.

"I certainly thought he was going to kill me," Blue gasped, rubbing his sore sides ten-

derly. "Say, I sure can believe that bear story now! A grizzly wouldn't have a ghost of a chance once he found hisself in that hombre's hug. Brad, I'm telling you, I thought my last hour had come!"

The entire encampment regarded the incident as the greatest possible joke. Blue needed only to touch his hand to his aching ribs thereafter to have the squaws roar with laughter while the children circled about him pointing derisive fingers at the victim. The boy bore it good-naturedly, but neither he nor Brad was grief-stricken when the last of the beaver pelts was ready, payment had been made and the hunters were once more on the open trail.

"What d'you think of the 'Rapahoes now?" Blue inquired, as they rode side by side through the pine forest, the snow having melted enough to make riding possible. "D'you agree with Kit about them?"

"The only thing I've got to say," Brad remarked emphatically, "is that I'm thankful we got out of that village alive. I believe if

we hadn't given 'em every lump of sugar we had and all the presents we brought along to use on the whole trip, they'd have scalped us to get 'em. And, say—wasn't it awful? All those people in the tepee? I'm not used to having so many roommates."

The journey back was uneventful, though the rapidly diminishing food supply caused the party to stop several times to kill and dress fresh meat.

All their hardships—and viewed in the light of later experiences neither boy thought them very heavy—were forgotten in the proud moment when they rode through the gates of the Fort, their horses in excellent condition, their packs full of prime beaver skins already dressed, and a message of good will (which Carson received with his tongue in his cheek) from the Arapahoe chief, One-Who-Kills-Bears-with-His-Arms, to his white brother of Taos, now at Bent's Fort.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WILLIAM BENT was ill. The entire Fort knew it and was anxious.

Carson had made one of his frequent journeys up from Taos and with him, greatly to Brad's delight, came Blue. Kit urged upon his friend remedy after remedy, but none of them brought relief.

The Mexicans proffered religious charms and relics and prayed earnestly for his recovery. Indian medicine men practised their rites, and one night Brad was a fascinated observer of a genuine medicine dance, held just outside the walls of the Fort with drums beating monotonously until daylight and fantastic figures leaping and falling, leaping and falling in the glow of the flames, hour after tireless hour.

Charlotte waddled in and out of the mas-

ter's room with savory dishes for which Bent was starving but could not eat. Andrew Green hovered over the patient solicitously. Owl Woman, Bent's Cheyenne wife, was beside herself with fear and sorrow.

"But what is it?" Brad asked. "What ails him?"

"Putrid sore throat," Carson answered. "It's closing up and he can't swallow."

"He ought to gargle with salt and vinegar." The boy recalled certain youthful illnesses in which that remedy had figured.

"He's gargled with everything except lye now, I reckon," was Carson's mournful answer. "It's a dry sore throat, d'you see, and nothing seems to do it any good. Bad business, Brad. If something isn't done mighty soon, looks like old Bill will starve. Owl Woman's feeding him through a quill now, and that ain't going to serve much longer, either."

Brad was truly concerned by the plight of the man whom he had come to regard with genuine affection. Bent had gone out of his

way to be kind to the young visitor from St. Joseph, as he was kind to all who sought the protection of the Fort.

“ Couldn’t we get a doctor down here—in time? ” he asked Ned Hundley anxiously. “ I could ride Greased Lightning—— ”

“ Where to? ” his uncle demanded. “ The nearest doctor—American doctor, that is, is in Missouri. It’d take you a couple of months at this time of the year, even riding alone and without pack-ponies, to get there—if you ever did get there alone; another couple of months to get back; and I tell you, Brad, Bent’s got to get relief within a couple of *days*, if he’s to live! ”

Presently through the Fort ran the news that “ Lawyer ” had been sent for from the Big Timbers, thirty miles away. A stir of excitement greeted this news.

Lawyer was a Cheyenne who had won his name from his ability to adjust differences within his own tribe. Neither a chief nor a medicine man, he yet held a high position among them for his shrewdness and resource-

fulness. He was a warm friend of Bent's, the rumor being that he was related to Owl Woman. Brad had often seen him, a tall, rugged figure, blanket-wrapped, sitting in the big upstairs room which was the general gathering-place for the white residents of the Fort, exchanging sentences at long intervals with William Bent.

"What can he do?" the boy demanded. "Hold another medicine dance, or tie some more of those queer charms to his forehead? Looks awfully silly to me, Ned, sending a runner in such a hurry just to get another Indian here when there are already nearly a hundred down in the court."

"Not all of them together have as much sense as Lawyer," Ned retorted. "If anybody within five hundred miles of here can help poor old Bill, it'll be Lawyer. Owl Woman's been trying to get Bent to let her send for him from the first, and I'm mighty glad she's succeeded at last."

Carson, who was listening, gave a chuckle. "She didn't succeed! She took matters into

her own hands. Bent can't talk now, you know. Plenty of gall for a squaw, wasn't it? Glad she did it, though. I gave the runner my own horse so's he could make the best time."

The fact that these two white men took so seriously the summoning of a Cheyenne to Bent's aid aroused Brad's interest, and he, with the rest of the Fort, watched from the battlements eagerly as the time drew near for Lawyer's arrival.

"Thar he comes!" Bim Black shouted.
"Oh, glory to God! Thar he comes!"

There were actual tears in the old man's eyes. The pain and hunger of his beloved leader had eaten like acid into his very soul.

The Indian was taken directly to the sick room and in the friendly and unhygienic fashion of the time as many of the Fort's residents as could crowd through the door came with him. Thus Brad Hundley became a witness to a chapter of medical experience which stands unique in its history.*

* A true incident.

Lawyer called for a spoon the first thing and with its handle pushed the patient's tongue down and looked into his throat, for all the world like old Doctor Keedy back home, Brad thought.

What he saw there evidently gave him grave concern, for he shook his head discouragingly. Then to the bewilderment of the onlookers he began to call for a miscellaneous assortment of objects: (1) a large lump of marrow grease; (2) a piece of sinew; (3) a small flat stick; (4) an awl.

While these were being procured he stalked out of the Fort on business of his own, returning shortly with something in his hand.

"What is it?" Brad whispered, craning his neck to see over the heads of the spectators.

"Burrs," Ned told him. "Sand burrs, as big as marrowfat peas. They have barbs as sharp as fishhooks and they all turn up the same way. Blamed if I know what he's going to do with 'em!"

"Cook 'em in the fat and stir 'em with the

stick," Brad suggested, out of his recent observations of Indian medicine practice.

But there was no fire in the room, nor did Lawyer call for one. Instead he went skillfully to work, drawing the sinew into half a dozen threads and tying a knot in the end of each.

Silence fell upon the room; a silence through which the sick man's tortured breathing cut sharply. Carson and Ned Hundley were watching with intelligent interest the movements of the old Indian. Crouched by the bed, Owl Woman wrung her hands in silent anxiety. The Mexicans muttered prayers, crossing themselves each time Bent's laborious breathing assailed their ears. In the corridor, clerks and Indians elbowed one another in their eagerness to see what was going on in the sick room.

Lawyer worked swiftly. He took the awl and pierced each burr and ran the sinew through it down to the knot. Then he rolled the burr in the marrow grease until the cruel barbs were completely covered. Next he

took up the stick, notched it deeply at one end and, wrapping the unknotted end of the sinew around his finger, placed the notched stick against the burr.

“ I see! ” Ned breathed in an undertone. “ That’s smart of him! Good old Lawyer! ”

In deep tones the Indian was commanding Bent to open his mouth once more. Down his throat to the full length of the stick went the grease-covered burr and was drawn out and thrust down again perhaps half a dozen times.

“ Ugh! ” grunted Lawyer, inspecting the burr. “ Sickness come out—and up! My brother soon be well now.”

It was true that the dry and corrupt matter which was filling Bent’s throat was brought up with each painful thrust of the barbed burr. The patient winced and the tears came into his eyes with the pain, but he allowed the Indian to continue the process as long as he would.

At last Lawyer nodded his satisfaction and threw aside the stick and burr. In his own

tongue he instructed Owl Woman to make a soothing gargle of certain herbs he produced from a package he had brought with him, and thankfully she disappeared to carry out his instructions. When this had been used, it was found that Bent could swallow almost without difficulty.

“He’ll do now,” Carson said with satisfaction. “Smart old chap, wasn’t he, to figure it all out like that? ’Bout three more of those treatments, and Bill will be as good as new.”

That night for the first time in over a week the Fort’s owner ate a little of the nourishing soup Charlotte had prepared for him. Before he slept, Lawyer repeated the swabbing. By morning the patient was greatly improved, and in three days he was, as Carson had predicted, as good as new.

“Who’d have supposed an *Indian* could have thought that all out?” Brad said in amaze.

“Look here, kid, you’ve still got a lot of things to learn about Indians,” Ned told him. “Come up in my room and I’ll show you a lot

of little tricks that'll make your eyes open, if I know anything."

He led the way to a small bedroom in the north wall and opened the heavy chest at the foot of his cot. From it he took various objects which he exhibited, one by one, to the interested Brad.

First there was a block of red sandstone, about ten inches square and perhaps eight inches deep. Along its surface were blackened grooves, made, so Ned explained, by fire, for the purpose of sharpening and shaping the tools the Indians made from bones.

"First they split the bones and scrape the marrow from them. Then they dry 'em carefully, turning the pieces every day until they are just brittle enough to handle—not so brittle they'll break, though. Look, here's the smallest—a needle. Look at the point at one end and the flat edge to the other."

"But there's no hole in it—no place to run the thread through!"

"Oh, they don't use the needle to carry the thread. Just to punch holes in the skin

through which they push the stiffened thread. Here's a larger size—that's an awl, like the one Lawyer used yesterday. Mighty useful things, these awls, and they come in all sizes. Here's a scraping tool to be used in dressing skins—see how sharp it is. Look out, there! Don't cut your hand on it." For Brad was drawing it curiously along his palm. "This broad, flat-edged affair is used to knead the skins, back and forth, to begin the softening process. Quite a respectable array of tools to have been made from the natural resources of the country, don't you think?"

"What's this little bundle of dried grasses?" Brad demanded.

"Medicine grass, my boy! There's more power in that—power of persuasion, I mean—than there is in all the silver-tongue oratory of our statesmen in Washington. The medicine man gathers these grasses under stipulated conditions and with proper ceremony. He binds them together with the string of reason—though I admit that to our uneducated eyes it looks a whole lot like a

piece of hemp. And he lays the bundle, with perhaps a dozen others like it, around the council fire and watches the effect of the heat on each bundle. Don't ask me what means what in the process. I only know that it's all of the greatest significance."

"Have you ever seen them making medicine?"

"*Have I?*" His uncle laughed ruefully. "Once in particular! I had a deep interest in the making of that medicine, as my own life hung on it. I'd been taken captive by the Kiowas—no, I've never told your father about it . . . what's the use? It's been over for six years or more. Anyway, there was some argument as to what should be done with me. Ordinarily I'd have been tortured and burned without any ado whatever, for the Kiowas had just broken one of their biennial peace pacts and I was considered legitimate prey. But it was rumored that Kit Carson and Ceran St. Vrain were headed that way, and even as long ago as that, the Kiowas held that combination in wholesome respect."

“Go on!” Ned had paused as though thinking of the influence the famous scout exerted over his sworn enemies, and Brad was impatient. “What happened?”

“They tied me up and made medicine,” his uncle said simply. “Fresh medicine it was, too, which meant that I was trussed up without food or water for two days while the medicine men gathered the grass under appropriate conditions—this was medicine grass, you know, but they can make medicine of almost everything under the sun—bound it with endless ritual, and at last laid it in a circle around the council fire. Brad, I tell you that was a scene to remember. The flames of the fire rising straight and still into the night; the chief and his braves in a circle and within that circle the medicine men, old and wrinkled, watching the curling of the green grass as it writhed in the heat. Beyond that inner circle other medicine men, fearsomely decked with horns, and painted, leaped up and down in a dance of invocation to the Great Spirit. At a respectful distance,

the squaws and children squatted, watching with excited interest all that went on."

"And you—"

"I was tied where I could see the whole thing, but of course it was all Greek to me—those curling medicine grasses, I mean. When they curved backward, I didn't know whether that was to be taken as a sign that I was to be saved from the flames myself, or not. I could only stand there, numb from the tightness of my bonds, my tongue parched with thirst, hunger torturing me . . . and look on. It was—a rather unpleasant experience," he finished dryly.

Brad let out a long breath of excitement. "I should rather think so. What did they finally decide?"

"Well, not to burn me, or I shouldn't be here now, showing all this Injun junk to a boy that's pop-eyed with astonishment over it. Come along, Brad. We'll go down to the court and see what's afoot for to-day."

"Hi, Ned, hold on a minute! What's this funny little clay figure—why, it looks like a

dog! And this mug with the bottom gone? What do you keep a broken thing like this for? ”

Ned came to look over his shoulder at the objects the boy had taken from the chest.

“ That mug and that dog,” he said seriously, “ were taken from a burial place where they had been put at least a thousand years ago—at least so some scientific fellow in Washington wrote me. I sent him some of the things we found in those graves, and he was all excited about them. Said they belonged to a vanished race that lived in America ten or twelve hundred years ago.”

Brad fingered the little objects with awe. “ A thousand years old! No wonder the mug got broken! ”

“ But it didn’t ‘ get ’ broken at all,” Ned informed him. “ It was ceremonially ‘ killed ’—that is, the bottom was knocked out of it at the death of the owner, so that it could never be used again.”

“ What about the dog? ” Brad asked. “ Look, its head is turned halfway over its

shoulder as though it were looking backward."

Ned explained. "That means that the soul of that person was only half ready to go to the Happy Hunting Grounds—or whatever heaven that vanished race were bound for. In other words, the chap's moral status is defined by the position of the dog's head. If it were completely turned back, you'd know the deceased was a bad 'un and his spirit a long way from heaven. If the dog looked straight ahead, then the person buried was of high standing among his fellows, and his soul was headed straight for paradise. This man, you see, was halfway in between; neither very good nor very bad—like a lot of us."

"I suppose," Brad said thoughtfully, "that the dog stands for the chief's pet . . . if it was a chief. They put it into his grave instead of killing the animal as some of the Indians do, I know."

Ned grinned. "Sorry to spoil that little theory of yours, but if you could have seen the

bones buried in with the man—cats and dogs and even a horse! This little figure is a fetish, the buried one's own object of worship and protection against evil. It was put into the grave with him so no one could deprive him of its benefits in the other world."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"The scientist chap I was telling you of sent me a book on the subject. You see, being so close to the place where a lot of these 'vanished race' people are buried——"

He was interrupted by Brad's startled exclamation. "Close? Do you mean close to here? To the Fort?"

"Why, yes." Ned was amused at the boy's excitement. "It's only a couple of days' ride from here in good weather. Over by Nero Hill. It's not on the trail to anything in particular and nobody ever goes there. I stumbled on the place kind of by accident, and I got interested in picking up queer things there. That's all."

"All!" The boy was stammering with excitement. "Ned, I'd give anything if I

could see that place! I always was interested in old places—old things that show how other people live.”

“You wouldn’t have had to go far to find ’em,” the young man said carelessly, “if you’d been down here when we built this Fort. We cut blocks of adobe, you know, and underneath we found all sorts of things—skeletons of people and of animals, weapons, cooking utensils, dishes—oh, more stuff than I can tell you about.”

“If I could just find one thing like that for myself——”

“Nothing easier! Wait till spring, and I’ll take you over to Nero Hill and let you do some excavating for yourself!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SPRING had come to the Fort. Brad was surprised to realize how quickly the winter had flown. There had been the almost daily advent of parties of hunters, laden with skins and full of tales of their adventures. There had been weekly candy-pulls and dances, by way of diversion. Brad had learned to play billiards on the table in the room over the gate leading to the blacksmith's shop and past the quarters for special guests.

The boy felt that he would never come to the end of the surprises the Fort held for him. Here in this fastness more than five hundred miles from civilization was a billiard table, the finest that money could buy anywhere. He questioned Ned as to its presence.

Ned laughed and shrugged his shoulders

in a gesture he had caught from the St. Vrain.

“It was like this,” he began. “Bill Bent imported a couple of tanners from St. Louis—experts they were. You know, Brad, in a place of this kind where we handle such an enormous number of skins, some of them scarce and hard to come by, it’s of the greatest importance to have them properly prepared for the market. The squaws are all right on beaver and wolf and bear, but when it comes to silver fox and the rarer kind of otter, the French trappers have certain ways that increase the value of the fur. So, as I said, Bill Bent brought a couple of Frenchies down to look after those pelts.”

“And did they bring the billiard table along with them?”

Ned shook his head. “Bill sent a train special to Independence to bring it after he saw his Frenchmen were getting homesick here and likely to quit. They’d never been out of St. Louis, you see, for all they knew so much about furs. They had been taught

to handle the green hides that others brought into the city. Bent was anxious to keep 'em, so he wrote to a firm in St. Louis and ordered the table sent to Independence by boat and there the wagon train picked it up and packed it all the way down here. Guess it was worth the trouble, though. The Frenchies are still here and happy—you know 'em, they're Antoine and Marcel—and lots of other folks besides have enjoyed that table, too."

"Don't the Indians ever play? I notice the Mexicans——"

"Oh, the Mexes take to it like ducks to water. Some of our best players are Mexicans. But you can't teach an Indian to hold a cue, much less to play a game. Queer, too. You'd think their skill with the lance and bow would stand them in good stead here, but it doesn't."

The first train out from the East was due and all within the Fort eagerly watched its coming. It meant not only fresh supplies of food and shoes and shirts, but mail; and news of what had been going on all winter in

the world. The Fort had been completely shut off from all contacts save with trappers' camps and Indian encampments since last fall. Whether there was still a government at Washington, whether the kings and queens of Europe still wore their crowns, whether, in fact, anybody lived in that half mythical place known as "back East," those within the adobe walls were ignorant.

A tragic incident marked the arrival of this first train, one which was to give Brad his first real sympathy with the Indian under the rule of the white man.

"Wagons in sight!" yelled a patrol late one April afternoon from his place on the battlements.

Instantly the Fort sprang to activity. April rarely if ever saw the advent of a wagon train. As a usual thing, the first ones did not push through until late in May, and everybody was agog with excitement and desire to welcome these early comers.

"I'll bet it's despatches from the Government," Ned speculated. "Bent's expecting

some, I know—about the new Kiowa peace. If so, there'll be a soldier guard in front of the wagons."

"Old Tobacco," with a grin of delight at the prospect of fresh "chaws," mounted his pony and rode along the trail to meet the train. What happened, those within the Fort learned later from the old Indian's dying lips.

Ned was right in believing that a soldier guard accompanied the wagons. Trouble was brewing with the Indians in the north and west, and the guard had been ordered to shoot at sight any redskin who showed hostile intent. When Old Tobacco came toward them, arm high in greeting, the captain of the guard raised and lowered his hand as a command to the old man to go back. The captain's ignorance of the Indian sign language was Tobacco's undoing. The gesture used by the captain meant "Come on!" and Tobacco came on confidently, happy in the hope of favors to come.

Again the captain signaled, not knowing

that his hand should have been held palm outward instead of palm down and that he was unwittingly beckoning the Indian to his death. When Tobacco persisted in pushing forward in what the soldier guard considered direct defiance of warning, the command to fire was given and the ancient chief fell with three bullets in his body.

Great was the wrath and grief within the Fort when Tobacco was borne within the gates, conscious but unmistakably dying. William Bent in particular was outraged at the ignorance which had mistaken the old man's trust in the advancing train for hostility toward it.

"But we were given orders to fire if any Indian did not obey the sign to go back," protested the captain. The angry reception he and his men had received was a source of deepest chagrin to him. He was a young fellow, somewhat swollen with the sense of his own temporary importance, and eager to show the owner of the Fort that he could handle Indians with the best of them. The verbal

drubbing he now received from Bent made him crimson with embarrassment.

“ Better learn the Indian signs before you make so free with your shooting-irons,” Bent concluded in a growl. “ The old chap was signaling his friendly intentions. You distinctly told him to come on. And then—you shot him. Oh, I know you *thought* you were telling him to go back; but down here it isn’t what a man thinks but what he does that counts. Poor Old Tobacco! He can’t understand yet why this should have happened to him.”

“ Is he still conscious? Can’t you make him understand that it was all a mistake? ”

Bent’s expression of stern anger softened. The captain was plainly distressed at the incident, anxious to atone for his mistake so far as lay within his power.

“ Come along! ” Bent rose suddenly. “ I’ll take you to him and interpret anything you want to say. He’s pretty far gone, but I guess he can still hear my voice.”

His assumption was correct. The old

man turned eyes which were fast glazing toward his friend and feebly held up a palm in a sign of friendly greeting.

“Talk fast,” Bent advised the captain. “He can’t last much longer.”

“Tell him,” the soldier faltered, “that I made a mistake; that it was my ignorance—an ignorance which should have been enlightened before I was sent down here—that caused it all. Ask him if he will forgive me, and if there is anything I can do to make up for it, even a little.”

Bent translated rapidly and in return Old Tobacco muttered a few incoherent sentences.

“He says—” in spite of his genuine grief Bent could not keep his lips from curving mirthfully—“that he’d like some tobacco—enough to cover his body, is the way he puts it—placed in his grave so that he won’t lack for a ‘chaw’ on his journey to the Happy Hunting Grounds.”

The captain wiped his brow. “Tell him he shall have it—if I have to make every man jack of the guard stick in his entire supply!”

Evidently the prospect of a well-provisioned journey to the other world consoled the Indian for leaving this one. He died with a smile on his face and his hand still held in its gesture of friendly greeting.

Bent, despite his momentary amusement at the odd request of the dying man, was worried and sad over the incident, and presently the reason developed. A runner came in from the Big Timbers and was closeted with the owner of the Fort for some time. At the end of the conference Bent summoned Ned and Brad.

“Trouble with the Cheyennes,” he announced briefly.

“With the *Cheyennes!*” Ned’s tone was incredulous. “Why, we’ve never had trouble with the Cheyennes since—” he stopped in sudden embarrassment.

“Since Carson and I took wives from among ’em,” Bent finished for him. “No, we’ve always lived in peace and friendship with our brothers at the Big Timbers, but now—”

“ Old Tobacco’s death, of course? ”

Bent nodded. “ The young bucks are taking it hard. They say Tobacco trusted the white man, and the white man slew him treacherously—which is all too near the truth, if you ask me. The chiefs—the older ones, at any rate—are trying to hold the young ones down, but the paint pots are being taken out and the war dances are being begun.”

Ned shared his gravity. “ If it’s actually gone that far, there’s only one thing to be done. Send for Kit and——”

“ Kit’s on his way here now—or should be—with the meat from the spring hunt. If he gets in before to-night, you and he and I will ride down the river and take council with the chiefs.”

“ Is it safe? ” Brad asked. “ You’ll be only three, and they’ll be hundreds——”

“ We’ll not go clear to the camp,” Bent explained. “ The runner who just came in said Big Elk and Blue Horse are waiting on the trail to talk the situation over with us. We’ll go as soon as Kit gets in.”

“ And if Kit doesn’t come to-night? ” Ned asked.

“ Then there’s nothing for it but for you and me to go. I hope Carson’ll get home, though. The Indians have an affection for me—or so I like to think—and the young bucks like you, Ned. But Kit—well, they regard him with a mixture of awe and fear that’s very helpful to us. They believe that it’s never any use attacking when he’s at the head of any war party. If he’s absent—well, it’s their numbers against our skill.”

“ And the soldiers—that captain and the guard that are responsible for all this—have gone on down to Taos and left us to bear the consequences of their act alone! ” Brad’s tone was indignant. The death of the friendly old Indian had made a deep impression on him.

“ I’m only too glad that they have gone,” Bent told him. “ Their very presence here at the Fort enraged the Indians. No, if we can get Kit to parley with them, I believe we can smooth ’em down.”

Ned suddenly chuckled. "Remember, Bill, the time the Crows attempted to drive off the horses and mules Kit had taken with him when he went down to the Big Timbers to cut logs to build the Fort?"

"Reckon I do," Bent laughed. "The Crows haven't forgotten it, either."

Brad made an imploring gesture. "Tell me! I don't want to miss a single story about Carson and the Indians."

"You'd have to sit and listen for a year," Ned said, "and then I wouldn't guarantee that you'd heard 'em all. This time—well, Bill there can tell you about it better than I can. Fire ahead, Bill!"

Bent settled back in his chair, as relaxed and apparently as care-free as though he were not facing, for the first time in his ten years at the Fort, an uprising among the tribe to which he was related, by marriage, at least. Brad had noticed before this, the man's enviable faculty of dismissing his troubles until action was required. All seasoned Indian fighters, the boy came to be-

lieve, possessed this ability, even as they were able to drop instantly to sleep at will, or to watch for long periods without fatigue.

“Kit had taken about a dozen men—mostly Mex, they were—down to the Big Timbers, as Ned says, to cut logs for the Fort. He took the herd along for two reasons. One was that it wasn’t safe to leave ’em here with only me and half a dozen men, who were busy working to guard ’em, and the other was that he wanted to load all the timber he could and bring it back at one time.”

“About sixty—horses and mules—weren’t there?” Ned interpolated.

“Sixty, or thereabouts. Well, Kit and his men were busy with their axes and saws when up rushed a party of Crows, all fixed and determined to drive off the herd—and drive ’em they did, spite of Kit’s yelling to ’em to vamoose. It happened that a couple of Cheyennes had been visiting the camp where Kit was, and they were still mounted—the only two blamed horses the Crows didn’t get.

“The thieves figured Kit wasn’t very likely to follow them—on foot, you see, and with a dozen men against nearly a hundred—so they went down the river a little way and camped for the night. But they didn’t know Kit—then! He came a-rarin’ after them and poured such a lively fire of bullets into them that they didn’t even stop to grab their own weapons before putting as much ground as possible between their skins and Kit’s new kind of rain.”

Brad was listening breathlessly. “And the horses and mules?”

“The Cheyennes—remember I said they were mounted—cut in behind the herd and started it back toward Kit’s camp. Not a single horse was lost, and it taught the Crows a valuable lesson. They’ve had a heap of respect for the Little Fierce Man, as they call him, ever since.”

“And Carson was—how old?”

“Sixteen,” Bent told him.

“Just my age.” Brad sat without speaking for a moment, trying to realize that the

soft-spoken, gentle-mannered man whom he knew, had been, even in his boyhood, so aggressive, resourceful and prompt to act.

There was a knock at the door and a sentry entered.

“A party of hunters in sight, sir,” he reported.

“Carson?” Bent asked, brightening.

“Can’t tell yet, but it looks like it.”

It was Carson, spent with a long week’s steady riding and wanting nothing so much as a hot supper and bed. When he heard of the situation among the Cheyennes, however, he delayed only long enough to eat a much-needed meal, and then, with Bent and Ned Hundley, he rode out again to take council with Big Elk and Blue Horse where they waited, in patient dignity, halfway down the trail to the Big Timbers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE three men returned to the Fort the next day greatly troubled at the situation. Blue Horse and Big Elk had not concealed from them the seriousness of the Cheyennes' attitude.

“A new generation has grown up since the peace their fathers and I made twelve years ago,” Bent said heavily. “The young bucks know nothing of what warfare with the whites means. They’ve forgotten, if they ever realized, the severe lessons we had to teach them before they came to respect the Fort and the men in it. They are looking with covetous eyes on our rifles and ammunition. They complain that the Pawnees are given more guns than they are able to trade for with us. They think of our well-filled meat-house, and their mouths water for the steaks and buffalo tongue stored there.”

Carson spoke morosely. "Worse than that, they've renewed their old alliance with the Sioux. You can trust a Cheyenne—as far as you can trust any Injun. But a Sioux—" He spat disgustedly.

"What will happen?"

Try as he would, Brad could not wholly keep the pleasurable excitement from his voice. An Indian uprising, and he safe within the armed defences of the Fort, would be something to remember all his life. He thrilled to the possibilities of it. Why, they might even yet be compelled to make use of the underground passage to the ice-house! He hoped in that case the dangerous task would be assigned to him. His boyish imagination pictured a lonely and heroic figure, making his stealthy way to the well-filled storehouse, bringing back to the beleaguered residents of the Fort the food so badly needed in their siege.

"Nothing much, I reckon!" His young uncle grinned at him derisively, reading his thoughts. "There'll be a few powwows and

a good many council fires burned, and parties sent to talk things over with us. Maybe a few of the young bucks'll fire a few shots at the walls and Bent'll let off the cannon a couple of times just to scare 'em—that'll be about all."

"There's something brewing among the Indians," Carson reported a day or two later. "I don't altogether like the looks of it, Bent."

"Signs of hostility?"

"N-no—you couldn't call it that, exactly. They just seem to be full of some idea of their own—not to be interested and curious as they usually are about what's going on here."

Bim Black had his own contribution to make to the general uneasiness within the Fort.

"I smell Comanches," he reported one morning as he walked about the ramparts. And later, "I smell 'Rapahoes an' Utes an' Kiowas an'——"

"Hold on there," the sentry jeered. "You can't smell all the Injuns of earth at one time. Pick out a tribe—or I'll allow

you two-three tribes," he concluded generously—"and stick to it, but don't go smelling so many at once."

That night the gates of the Fort closed upon the fewest number of Indians Bent could remember within its walls. He remarked the fact uneasily, and doubled the number of patrols on the battlements.

Just before dawn everybody was startled to hear the bugles ringing out from the southwest bastion. Bent appeared with a promptness which suggested he had not removed his clothes during the night. Carson and Ned Hundley were not far behind, and Brad came, struggling into his hunting shirt as he walked.

"Injuns!" reported the sentry who came to the upstairs room and saluted. "Thousands and thousands of Injuns coming over the plain."

Brad followed the three men eagerly as they went upstairs. Several of the hunters were taking turns looking through the spy-glass which was trained on the prairie, but

the keen vision of the three who had gazed from those battlements for so long needed no supplementary aid. And indeed before long, even Brad could discern the swiftly moving hordes which were pouring along the stretch between the Fort and the river.

“Look to the south,” Carson said quietly. “Crows! Comanches, too, looks like, as near as I can make out.”

“Injuns to the east, sir,” another sentry reported.

“Kiowas?” Bent asked.

“Looks to be, sir.”

“An attack or a bluff, do you reckon?”

It was Ned Hundley who spoke.

“Can’t tell yet. We’ll prepare for the worst, at any rate.”

The owner of the Fort gave quiet orders which were at once carried out. The gates had not been opened and the brass cannon was still inside. Men with loaded rifles were stationed at every loophole. The patrols stood beside their cannon with matches ready to touch off the powder. The few Indians

within the Fort were herded into the corral despite their protestations of loyalty.

Owl Woman, Bent's Cheyenne wife, rocked herself to and fro, wailing in anticipation of the coming conflict. Bent stopped to speak a few words of reassurance to her.

Down in the courtyard Brad came upon a tragic figure. It was the sad Sioux wife of Sopris, the wagon master. She had never become reconciled to her exile, and spent her time gazing wistfully northward toward the land of the Dakotas. Years had softened her longing for her own people, yet the knowledge that now they were surging toward the Fort in great numbers stirred her wish to see familiar faces once more. She crouched in the shadow of the hide-press, not wailing like Owl Woman, but with arms crossed on her breast and black head bent almost to the adobe floor of the *patio*. Her half-breed babies tugged in vain at her fringed and beaded skirt.

"Better stay up on the roofs, Brad," his uncle advised. "This is a sight you'll never

see again. I verily believe every Indian in the northwest is pouring down upon the Fort."

Brad ran up the rude steps quickly, and stood dumfounded as he gazed.

The green prairie, covered now with fresh grass, was alive with a sea of horsemen flowing steadily in the direction of the Fort. The sun shone on ornaments of polished brass or gold, on bright bits of shell, on the gay trappings of horses, dazzling the onlooker's eye.

Color—Brad wondered if ever before he had seen so much color, or would again—undulating, quivering, advancing and receding with the motion of the wearer's mount. The red blankets of the Sioux, the striped blue and yellow of the Comanches, the particolors of the Kiowas, even the brick red and black of the few Navahoes who had crossed the river to join in the great gathering, formed a mosaic which the boy would never forget.

"It must be all the Indians in the world!"

he gasped. "Ned! Will the Fort hold out?" For the first time a feeling of fear damped his excitement. If all those advancing figures were to close in upon the adobe walls, what chance would there be to resist the sheer force of numbers?

"We don't know yet that it is an attack," Ned answered reassuringly. "It looks more like a council to me. See, they're getting closer now. There are no war bonnets in sight, no war paint on the naked braves. I'll warrant they have all their regalia with them, though, and will don it instantter if the council doesn't go to suit 'em."

"Council among themselves, or with Bent?"

"With Bent—eventually. They'll do a lot of powwowing among themselves first, I reckon. Don't worry, Brad. Bill Bent knows how to handle 'em. At the worst, they couldn't do more than pen us in here, and we can stand off a siege for a year, if necessary."

In spite of his encouraging words, Ned's

eyes seldom left the advancing hordes before them. All that day and all night and for two days and nights after, the mighty sea continued to flow toward the Fort. To Brad's astonishment, it stopped within a hundred yards of the walls, leaving a clear space on all four sides. Sentries from the various Indian tribes patrolled the edge of this space.

Miraculously the gigantic encampment assumed an aspect of order. Tepees sprung up as though by magic, the form and coloring indicating in most cases the identity of the tribes. A great wheel, of which the Fort was the hub, spread out over the plain, the narrow lanes which divided Sioux from Crow and Cheyenne from Kiowa, forming the spokes. Necessarily one side of this wheel was flattened by the Arkansas River.

It was, as Ned Hundley had said, a sight to be seen only once in a lifetime.

Those within the Fort preserved a cautious indifference to the preparations without. The gates were kept fast shut, the rifles were never withdrawn from the loopholes. Sen-

tries, heavily and rather spectacularly armed, paraded ostentatiously on the ramparts, and reveille and taps rang out with military precision night and morning. In fact, Bent's Fort resembled as never before a Government fastness rather than the private enterprise of a party of St. Louis traders that it was.

The policy of indifference within the Fort was matched by the behavior of the Indians without it. Camp fires burned steadily, ceremonial dances went on night and day, chants rose and fell with monotonous regularity, but not a redskin applied for admission at the gates, or allowed his gaze to rest unduly long on the walls of the white man's dwelling-place.

At the end of the third day of ordered activity outside the Fort, a messenger knocked with great pomp and ceremony at the East gate and was bidden to enter. He came in fearlessly, his bold gaze roving from one strange object to another. This was his first contact with the white man, and his curiosity

almost overrode the dignity of his errand. He demanded, in guttural Kiowa speech, to be taken to William Bent.

In that upper chamber which had been the scene of so many diplomatic conferences, Bent received him. Carson and Ned were also present and an Indian interpreter, in case his services should be needed. Bent, however, had no difficulty in understanding the simple message borne by the Kiowa.

The vast gathering on the plains, he told them, was one looking toward a universal peace. Peace among all his brothers, he emphasized. All tribes were to bury the hatchet, war bonnets were to be hung on the poles of the tepees as relics to be handed down to the children's children, the scalping-knife and torture weapons were to be turned to peaceful uses.

"M'mph!" grunted Kit Carson. "Going to have heaven right down here on earth. How many tribes are thinking of going into this Sunday School class?"

"Kiowas, Sioux, Cheyennes," the mes-

senger ran off glibly. "Crows, Arapahoes _____,"

"Hey! Hold on a minute! 'Rapahoes, did you say? That settles it! Any peace the 'Rapahoes—"

"Careful, Kit!" Bent warned in English. "He may understand more than we realize."

The doughty little Indian fighter edged forward in his chair.

"Lemme ask him just this one question, Bill," he said. "Are the Pawnees joinin' up in this precious peace pact, too?"

"Pawnees, Iroquois, Comanches!" The round head, shaven save for the upstanding scalp lock, bobbed assentingly. "Apaches, Navahoes——"

"In fact, the lion and the lamb, the cat and the mouse, the snake and the bird—all the whole shooting match are going to set up housekeeping together." Carson rose. "Bill, I wouldn't have any truck with such foolishness, if I was you. This here's the regular ten-year play-party of the northwest tribes. They get it up like one of them

draymas the boys tell about seein' in St. Louis, and enjoy themselves a heap while it's going on. Then they turn 'round and drive their hatchets into each other's skulls as per usual. All is, they happened to pick out the vicinity of the Fort to use for their stage this time."

The Kiowa messenger stolidly ignored the interruption in a strange tongue. With flowery phrases of flattery he invited Bent to come out to the all-night council to be held, a council which would be attended by representatives from each of the tribes there assembled.

"Don't go, Bill," Hundley warned him. "It's plain suicide, trusting yourself outside the Fort among those thousands of redskins. Tell the man that his white brothers are glad of the impending peace among the red men, but that it is after all the red man's affair and not ours."

Bent shook his head. "They would take a refusal as an insult. Like Kit, I'm always suspicious of the sincerity and permanency

of these wholesale peace resolutions, but at least they are effective while they last. Tell the noble chiefs assembled at your council fires," he said in Kiowa, "that their brother, the white man, will come to the meeting-place when darkness falls. Tell them that he will come alone and unarmed, trusting himself to the protection of his brothers, the Cheyennes and the Kiowas and the Sioux——"

"And the 'Rapahoes and Pawnees," Carson interrupted derisively.

"Tell him that the gates of the Fort will be closed behind me and——"

"Every rifle on the place trained on that council fire in case of any monkey business!"

Bent shook his head, half in amusement, half in annoyance, at his young lieutenant. The older man inclined wherever possible to pacific measures with the Indians. Carson, on the other hand, believed that only by a constant show of force could the respect of the Indians for the whites be maintained; and certainly every time Bent had departed from Carson's counsel he had regretted it.

Together William Bent and Christopher Carson made a pair whose influence over the southwest and northwest Indians can never be entirely estimated. Brad realized their potency vaguely as he watched the gates being opened at dusk for Bent's departure from the Fort.

It was impressively dramatic—that solitary journey of the white man across the fire-lighted neutral territory which separated the walls of the Fort from the first line of the Indian encampment. A tall, impressive figure was William Bent, his hair as glossily black as a crow's, his shoulders as straight as an Indian's. He moved softly and lithely in his soft calfskin boots.

The group of chieftains about the central fire parted to admit him. For a moment the leaping flames showed him clearly, then the ranks of painted and blanketed Indians closed upon him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DAWN saw the white men on the battlements of the Fort, anxiously scanning the encampment outside. There had been nothing to indicate during the night that harm had come to William Bent.

True, the monotonous boom of the parchment-covered drums had gone on for hours and the yells and howls of the medicine men had never ceased. Under cover of these sounds Bent's cries for help—supposing that he had had time to cry out before a Sioux arrow or an Arapahoe lance had stilled his voice forever—would not have been heard.

But as the first rays of the sun shone on the cactus plants which grew on the roofs of the Fort, Bent was seen composedly crossing the space before the gates. At once the heavy plank doors swung open to admit him, and

Carson and the two Hundleys descended to Bent's own room where Andrew Green, his teeth gleaming rapturously in his black face at the return of his beloved master, was bringing the best available hot food to the table for his refreshment.

"Well," began Carson, "did you play-act, too, with the rest of 'em? Have you sworn blood kinship with the 'Rapahoes, to say nothing of the Pawnees?"

"Something like that," Bent answered equably, taking the cup of hot coffee his servant offered him. "It's the ten-year universal peace council you spoke of, Kit. I never happened to run across its actual ceremonial before, though I've heard of it, of course. It seems that the site of the Fort was chosen out of compliment to us—well, to me, to be strictly honest. Big Elk and Blue Horse of the Cheyennes, and Six Rattles of the Sioux and several of the Comanche chiefs have sort of spread the word that we deal justly if somewhat severely—" he grinned at Carson—"with the red man, and it was

decided that the council fires should be lighted within sight of the Fort. Also," he said impressively, "that any questions of arbitration should be referred to me."

Carson rose from his chair as though on springs.

"Bill, you ain't a-goin' to be a big enough fool——"

"You're right I'm not," his senior said emphatically. "I've got better sense than to run my head into a noose deliberately. I made a speech—wish you fellows could have heard me! It was a regular oration, if I do say so myself—and I told them that their white brother was touched and honored by the compliment they had paid him; that he rejoiced in the burying of the hatchets between tribes which had always been his friends——"

"Huh!" Kit snorted.

"And that his wisdom, though great, was unequal to that of their own chieftains in the matter of Indian affairs, and therefore he would leave the peace terms entirely to them,

confident that peace would dwell among them as the bird dwells happily in its nest——”

“And for about as long, too,” put in the irrepressible Carson.

“And that the moon of blossoms would see friendship from the Cimarron to the North Platte. I’ll tell you one thing, Kit,” Bent went on, dropping his eloquence for everyday speech. “This peace shindig is the very best thing that ever happened to us. The Cheyennes have forgotten their resentment over Old Tobacco’s death, and all danger of an uprising among them is over.” He sighed with patent relief. “I’ll admit, now that it is over, I was kind of wrought up when the tribes began to gather. It might be a peace conference and it might be—a general massacre. I couldn’t tell how far the war talk had spread, you see. And if the Cheyennes, the most peaceable of all the Indians we have dealings with, were angered against us, it would touch off a spark among the other tribes that would likely have blown us up and the Fort with us.” He relaxed in

his chair, visibly pleased with the present aspect of things.

“How much longer is this powwow to last?” Ned jerked a thumb toward the outer wall.

“Three more days,” Bent told him. “I’ve invited in a few chiefs from each tribe——”

“How many altogether?”

“About fifty, I believe.” He turned to Andrew Green. “Send Owl Woman to me—and Charlotte and Rosalie and any of the Indian women who happen to be hanging around. I’m going to give the visitors a big feed,” he explained to the other men. “Afterwards I’ll show them around the Fort, let them look through the spyglass——”

“And fire a few salutes in their honor,” Brad ventured to suggest eagerly. “That’ll show ’em we have plenty of guns and can defend ourselves.”

Bent shook his head with a kind smile at the boy.

“The very last thing I’d dare to do, Brad.

Think a minute! Fifty of their leaders inside the walls—and many of the Indians who have come here for the first time are suspicious of the Fort, even though they have been told we are friendly. The roar of the cannon bursts forth, flames and smoke are seen . . . what do you think the thousands and thousands of Indians outside would make of it all? They would believe that their chieftains were being killed—tortured, of course. The Fort wouldn't last half an hour under the assault which would follow."

Brad hung his head, abashed. Every day he realized more clearly how little he knew of the proper way to deal with the Indians, how experienced and wise were these men who had built the Fort. Seeing his embarrassment, Bent went on:

"I want your help, Brad. I want to get up some sort of entertainment for them. Music—the Mexicans can sing and play their guitars and I'd like right well to have you give us some tunes on that harmonica of yours. Will you do it, my boy? Play

some of the jiggety things I hear you giving the boys out in the corral.”

The time of the ceremonial visit had been fixed for afternoon, but long before that time the blanketed chiefs were at the gate, waiting in dignified silence until they should be admitted.

Within the Fort all was frenzied activity. Every cook-pot on the place was simmering over a fire, and enough dried buffalo meat was cooking to feed an army, Brad considered. Bread was being shaped into flat loaves by dusky and bronze hands alike, as Charlotte impressed both the squaws and the Mexican women into her service. She waddled excitedly about, giving orders, exhorting her helpers, screaming at Andrew to speed up his work of making into a mighty chowder the fish which had lain between blocks of ice all winter. Men came and went between the ice-house and the Fort with load after load of supplies.

“Fire water?” Ned inquired of William Bent significantly.

“Not a drop,” answered Bent firmly. “I know they’ll want it, perhaps feel insulted if they don’t get it, but I can’t risk it, Ned. One drink, and some of these Indians go wild. Lock up every keg of whiskey and bring me the keys. Tell the men they are not to mention the word, and if any of the chiefs question them, they are to shake their heads as though they know nothing about it. The situation is ticklish enough without adding the menace of whiskey.”

By two o’clock the food was ready to be served, a process accomplished by the simple expedient of taking the kettles from the fire and beckoning the guests to help themselves. In most cases the chiefs had brought along their own dishes—a turtle shell, a pottery bowl, occasionally a tin army plate, the acquisition of which it was wiser not to inquire into; but if any guest lacked a food receptacle, he merely waited until the stew was partly cool and then dipped his hand into it and proceeded industriously with his meal.

After dinner came the impromptu enter-

tainment. Two of the Frenchmen put on a fencing bout and the Indians watched stolidly while the sabres glanced and feinted, flashing menacingly in the spring sunshine. Grunts of approval greeted the quickness of the fencers, but when the performance ended without bloodshed on either side, they were clearly disappointed.

“They’ll like the next act, though,” said Ned, who had arranged it.

Two of the Cheyennes who had wives within the Fort now came forward, their bronze bodies gleaming with grease. They were wrestlers, and white and red men alike howled with mirth to see their slippery bodies vainly clutched at by equally slippery hands. When at last one man gripped his opponent by his coarse black hair, and with this vantage hold managed to grip a muscular arm about his waist and throw him, the courtyard rang with the approving yells of the spectators.

“You next, Brad,” said his uncle in an undertone. “Don’t be scared, boy! Play ’em something loud and lively!”

For a moment Brad's composure almost deserted him. He found himself within a ring of squatting forms, every cold black eye regarding him intently, every painted face carefully expressionless. But above the ring of shaven and bedecked heads he saw Carson, watching him.

Here, the boy told himself, was an opportunity to show his hero that he had profited by his months at the Fort. He would treat these Indians with Carson's own mixture of severity and good nature . . . at least, he amended modestly, he would try hard for that difficult combination.

He put the harmonica to his lips, drew a long breath and burst into the strains of Ol' Dan Tucker.

“Ol' Dan Tucker down in town,
Swingin' the ladies all aroun',
First to the right, an' then to the left,
An' then to the one that you love best.”

“Hi! Yi!” yelled the bearded trappers and sang lustily the words of the next two verses.

“ Ol’ Dan Tucker is a fine ol’ man,
Washed his face in a fryin’-pan,
Combed his hair with a wagon-wheel,
An’ died with a toothache in his heel.

“ Ol’ Dan Tucker down in town,
A-ridin’ a goat an’ a-leadin’ a houn’.
The houn’ give a howl an’ th’ goat give a jump,
An’ throwed Ol’ Dan a-straddle of a stump.”

Loudly the chorus rang through the *patio*,
the Mexicans’ musical voices leading the rest,
though they made queer work of the words.

“ Git out o’ th’ way for Ol’ Dan Tucker,
He’s too late to git his supper,
Supper’s over, an’ breakfast’s a-cookin’,
An’ Ol’ Dan Tucker’s standin’ lookin’.”

The song, which had been written by a black-face minstrel who was later to become famous as the author of “Dixie,” had made its appearance in Missouri just before Brad left St. Joseph. All along the Santa Fe Trail to the point where it diverged for Bent’s Fort the boy had played it, the rollicking strains finding favor with every man in the wagon train.

Down to Taos the catchy tune went, carried there by Captain Blunt and his men. Practically every hunting party which left the Fort that winter had a member in it who whistled or sang it; and thus the song which was not to enter vaudeville in the East until four years later was already well known in the desert wastes and mountain trails of the Western world.

So pleased with Brad's contribution to the entertainment were the hosts themselves that they clamored for more and more, and Carson, seeing by the faces of the chiefs that they, too, were enjoying the strange music, nodded to the boy to go on. He played until his lips were dry and his tongue stiff but as he sank down on the adobe floor, completely exhausted, he was rewarded by Kit's hand on his shoulder and Kit's drawling voice in his ear:

“ Good medicine, Brad! They liked it the best of anything yet! ”

Brad's playing had a ludicrous yet momentarily threatening result. When the

visit was ended and the chieftains, having received gifts of small mirrors and shells and pieces of gay calico, were leaving, Brad discovered that his beloved harmonica had been taken from the pocket of his coat. Without pausing to consider the advisability of concealing his loss, he mentioned it to the wagon-master.

Now it happened that Sopris was an inordinate lover of music, and the prospect of being deprived of the strains of the harmonica for the rest of Brad's stay was too much for him. It may have been, too, that he cherished a hope of obtaining eventually the instrument for himself, either by barter or gift. At any rate, he set up a loud clamor for the restoration of Brad's property.

At once the other Frenchmen caught it up.

"De redskeen steal Brrrad's mouth mu-seec! Make heem to geeve eet back, M'sieu Bent, M'sieu Carrrrson!"

One impulsive soul darted forward and thrust his hand into the blanket of the Indian who had stood nearest to Brad. He gave a

yell of triumph as his fingers encountered the missing harmonica.

The chief scowled and muttered in his own tongue, and the bland suavity of the other visitors gave way to displeased frowns.

“Give it back to him, Brad, give it back,” Bent counseled hurriedly. “We don’t want to undo all the good that’s been accomplished here to-day.”

Brad was on the point of obeying, the hunters were voicing their discontent in no uncertain terms when Carson as usual saved the day.

He explained in his usual impartial blend of dialect which seemed to be universally understood among the Indians that the young white brother of the Indians would be delighted to give to the great chief the trifle which had caught his fancy. But, explained Kit impressively, it was a medicine music, and would respond only to the owner. He illustrated this by taking the harmonica from Brad and placing it to his own lips. As he did not blow, naturally there was no sound in

response. He passed it on to Bent who quick-wittedly followed his example. Then Carson invited the chief to test its powers for himself.

Brad restrained a grin as he saw the painted mouth of the chief laid to the keys of the instrument and heard the resulting silence. The redskin dropped his ill-gotten possession sullenly. Medicine which was good medicine for the white man was often very bad medicine for the red, as he knew from sorrowful experience.

“Now show him that you can play it, Brad,” Carson suggested.

Brad picked it up, wiped it surreptitiously on his coat and setting it to his lips, blew “Taps!”

The Indians at once recognized the strains with which they had grown familiar during their stay outside the Fort. Awed, they flung palms outward and downward in ceremonial greeting of the tiny object which could imitate so accurately the soldier’s bugle.

When they had finally withdrawn from the

Fort and made their way across the grassy space to their own fires, it was felt by all within the adobe walls that the effect of the incident of the harmonica had been vastly increased by that final scene.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“BRAD,” said Ned Hundley, “remember that I promised you a trip to Nero Hill?”

“Do I remember!” his nephew shouted. “I’ve been so afraid *you* were going to forget——”

Ned was amused. “You could have reminded me! I’ve never noticed that you suffer from an impediment in your speech.”

The boy grinned a little sheepishly. His ready tongue had wagged rather freely, he feared, in the company of the hunters and trappers. The mountaineers, hungry for news of civilization, though not for anything would they return to so tame a life, were forever plying Brad with questions. Which was the better market for pelts, Independence or St. Joseph? How much did prime beaver skin bring? What was this talk of a

rifle which would shoot twice or even three times without re-loading? Was it true that mules were almost entirely replacing oxen in Missouri?

Nothing loath, the boy, feeling himself to be a true cosmopolite because he came from a town which numbered five hundred inhabitants and had stayed a week in St. Louis besides, did ample justice to the facts he had and supplied any gaps in them by description, speculation and prophecy of his own. When he wasn't talking, Ned declared, he was playing his harmonica. In any case, he kept his lips and tongue at work.

Brad swept the conversation back to its starting point.

"Are we going to take that trip, Ned? Honestly?"

"Why not?"

"I thought—with the wagons being packed for the eastern trip—everybody so busy and all—Bent says you are going with that train——"

"Only I?" Ned questioned significantly.

“How about a certain young fellow, five feet ten in his stocking feet, weighing something around a hundred and fifty-three pounds——”

“Ned!” There was genuine dismay in his voice. “Am I—you don’t mean to say—why, I never once thought——”

“Back your horses and start over,” was the kindly advice. “Are you going back with me, do you mean? Yes, old-timer, you are! Say, kid, what did you expect? That you were going to spend the rest of your life down here?”

“I—I reckon I hadn’t thought,” Brad faltered. “I’ve had such a rousing good time down here—it’s all been so different and—and interesting——”

“Well, well!” Hundley rose briskly and clapped his nephew on the shoulder. “We’re not gone yet. And there’s a good deal to see and do before the train pulls out.”

“You said a year——” The boy still dwelt on the idea of leaving the Fort. “It’s only May now.”

“ And we leave the second week in June. It’s an unusually long and heavily loaded train, and by the time we stop along the way to collect the pelts that are waiting for us in Indian villages along the trail, it will be September before we reach Independence. It won’t lack much of a year by the time you are back in St. Joseph.” Then seeing that Brad’s face still wore its look of consternation, he strove to lead the boy’s thoughts elsewhere. “ About our trip now. Wouldn’t you like to go to Nero Hill? ”

“ Where is it? ” Brad’s tone was not greatly interested. He was trying to realize that soon—in two weeks, in fact—he would be on his way back to Missouri and his glorious holiday would be over.

“ It’s between Bob Creek and Horse Creek—north and west of here. We’ll follow the Arkansas River to the mouth of Bob Creek and then strike north. Nero Hill is not high—not a real mountain, as it’s only about 4,600 feet, but the plains at its foot are rich in relics of those people I told you about.”

Despite himself, Brad Hundley brightened. Since that first inspection of his uncle's queer collection, he had examined the objects over and over again and a great longing to find for himself some evidence of a race that had vanished a thousand years ago possessed him.

"When do we start?" he asked eagerly.

Ned laughed. "That stirs you up, does it? We start to-morrow at sunup, young fellow. That suit you all right?"

"Just you and I?" Brad's eagerness was growing.

"Nobody else. This isn't a hunting trip, and we'll be gone only ten days in all. *Can't* be gone any longer if I'm to take charge of the wagon train. We'll take a couple of pack horses along with food for the trip there and room to bring back whatever you happen to find. I've told Bill Bent about it, and he thinks it's a good thing—educational for you, you know." He grinned derisively at Brad, remembering his brother's remark that the year at the Fort would afford educational ad-

vantages to the boy. "Bound to do my duty by you, you know."

Brad grinned back. Neither he nor his young uncle realized how educational in the truest and broadest sense of the word, these months had been. Brad, his eager mind already beginning to outgrow the narrow confines of the little village which was his home, had kept his eyes and ears open during his months at the Fort, and had accumulated not only much knowledge of trapping and hunting, much wisdom as to the value of pelts and hides, but an ability to judge human nature, a resourcefulness, a knowledge of how to look after himself which was all his life long to stand him in good stead.

"Scoot and pack your saddlebags," Ned commanded. "We'll turn in early to-night and be well on our way by sunrise."

They were four days making the journey. There was no trail, but they made good time as the pack ponies were not heavily laden and no storms delayed them. They went through wooded country along the Arkansas River,

but when they turned north at the mouth of Bob Creek, the land grew barren and water holes had to be taken into consideration.

On the evening of the fourth day, Ned reined in his horse by a spring which was sheltered by a group of cottonwoods.

“This will be our base of operations,” he announced. “We’ll sleep here to-night, and to-morrow I’ll show you where Ceran St. Vrain and I once came upon the burial places. I don’t suppose any one has visited them since we were there.”

Brad could hardly sleep that night for excitement. The blood of the born archeologist coursed through his veins, and the prospect of uncovering revelations of the past thrilled him through and through. He was up and had the fire burning briskly and the coffee made before Ned had stirred yawningly in his blankets.

To the boy’s surprise, much of their equipment was left at the camp, securely fastened to the limbs of the trees out of reach of coyotes.

“ Suppose some Indians came along and stole it,” he protested.

“ No Indians come here,” was the confident reply. “ They are scared to death of the place. They believe that the spirits of those long-buried people hover over the spot and that to go near it is bad luck.”

“ Weren’t they Indians themselves—the folks buried here? ”

“ Nobody knows—at least I don’t,” Ned amended honestly. “ The scientific chap I wrote to in Washington sent a long report, full of five-syllabled words, claiming that they were Flatheads—Indians that bound their children’s heads to a board to make ’em flat. Maybe so—but I’ve found a good many skulls that weren’t distorted.”

Brad shivered delightedly. “ Skulls? ”

“ Certainly—skulls. Don’t you realize it’s a graveyard we’re going to? I figure that once this land was stiff clay like around the Fort; then the sand blew across the desert and covered it up, and it was hidden for hundreds of years—a thousand, maybe, like the

Washington man said. Then the wind changed its course—blew from the other direction for a while, and the sand was swept off and the graves exposed.”

“Is it right——” Brad hesitated, his strong desire to investigate what was to come warring with his scruples. “Is it right for us to dig up those skeletons?”

“You won’t have to do much digging,” Ned told him dryly. “St. Vrain and I could hardly keep our horses from stepping on the bones that lay in our path. And I reckon by this time the folks that were buried there aren’t caring very much what happens to their bones. Maybe they’d prefer to have ’em sent East so that the world could know that they once lived, than to let ’em be entirely forgotten. Whatever adds to our knowledge of the human race is helpful to us, I suppose. Now, Brad, keep your eyes peeled. It’s just about here that Ceran and I——” He broke off to point downward and Brad was off his horse in an instant. There at his feet lay a grinning skull, its eye-

sockets seeming to scan the sky for a sight of the sun.

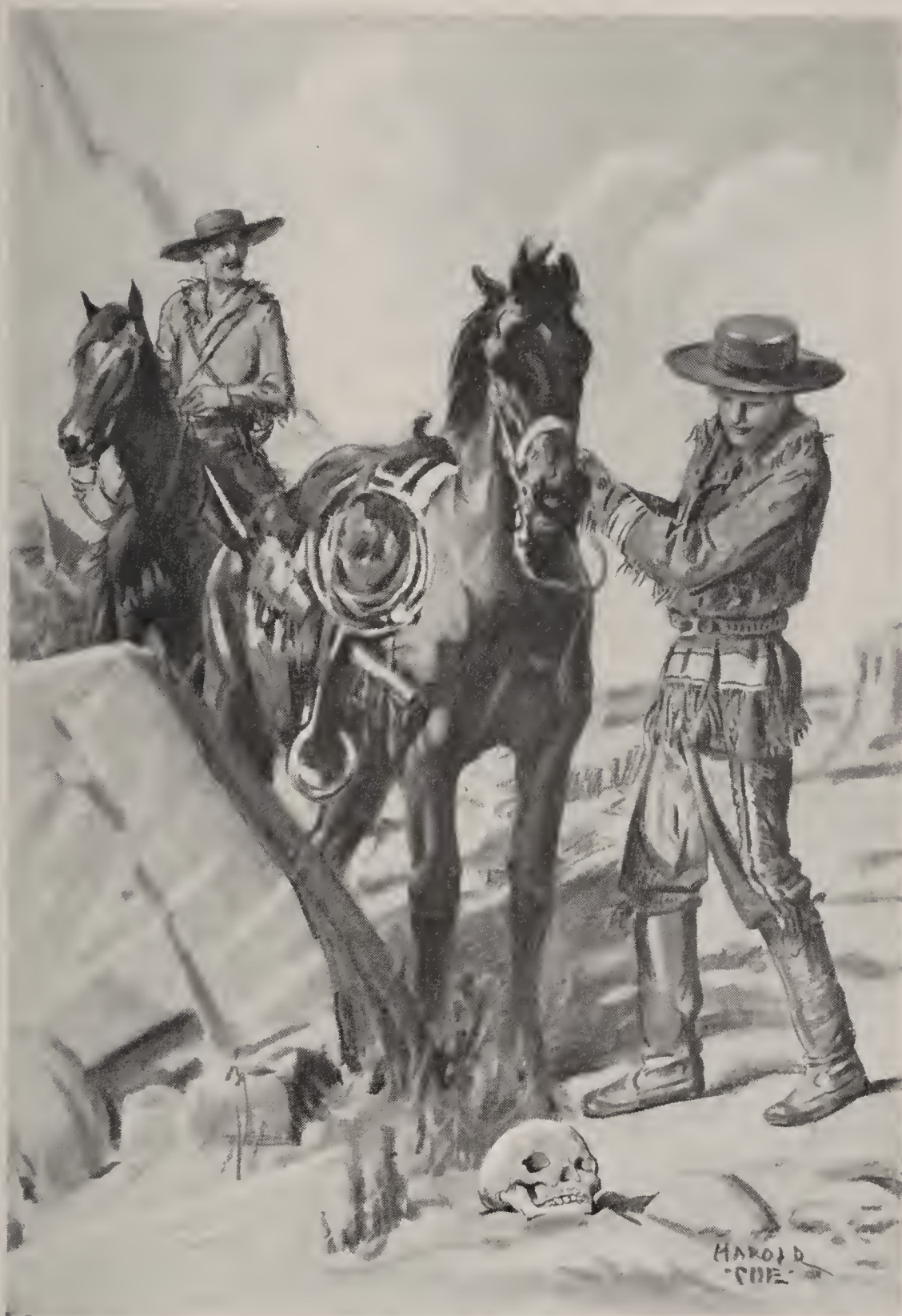
“An old man,” Ned said, taking it from him.

“How can you tell?”

“That it’s a man, by its shape. The space between here and here—” he put a thumb and finger from the temple to the top of the head—“is too long to be a woman. I know he’s old, because his teeth are worn down almost to the jaw-bones. The old fellow suffered from toothache, too—look at this broken and hollow one! Want to keep this skull, Brad?”

Brad replied by dropping the object, not without respect, into his saddlebags.

All day the two roamed back and forth along the sandy area and almost every hour Brad came upon something of interest to him. Now it was a pottery bowl whose beautiful markings made him wonder at the artistic skill of its maker; now it was one of the bone implements which had interested him so much in Ned’s room at the Fort; now it was a tall



THERE AT HIS FEET LAY A GRINNING SKULL.—Page 239

jar at the bottom of which he discovered a handful of grain, so dried and darkened by age that it was impossible to tell the nature of it.

The Colorado sky was clear and lovely above them. Fresh little breezes came down from the distant mountains. Here and there in the desert bloomed gay little flowers, their roots in the dust of a people once as active as any, but long since forgotten.

The two men, for Brad's mental and physical growth deserved the name of man, were as much alone as though they were at the ends of the earth; and indeed, Ned thought, looking about him with a little shiver, that fabled place must greatly resemble the spot on which they stood: barren, treeless, and waterless, and strewn about with the bones and skulls of hundreds who had drawn their last breath before the white man had ever been seen in America.

Just at sunset he summoned Brad who had roamed to a little distance.

Something in the tone of Ned's voice, ex-

cited yet touched with awe, brought the boy hurrying quickly to his side.

“Look at this, Brad,” Ned Hundley said softly. He pointed, and they stood silently gazing at what Ned had found.

The freakish wind had uncovered the side of a sand dune, almost as though to open a door on the little room which had been hidden within. Lying as peacefully in this tiny chamber as though she were in her own carved ivory bed within her home in the cliffs, was the half-mummied body of a woman. Her head and shoulders emerged from a shrouding robe, as soft to the touch as eiderdown.

“It’s a feather robe,” Brad said, still in that lowered voice as though remembering he spoke in the presence of the dead. “She must have been a princess, as only royalty was buried in those marvelous robes. This is an unusually fine specimen.”

Brad leaned over to examine it more closely. “It looks like soft fur rather than feathers. But the color is so queer!”

“It’s made of both feathers and fur; fur

from rabbits, feathers from the breasts of birds. Both are woven into a foundation of braided yucca leaves. See what a delicate piece of work this is, Brad! It's gray from the sand and the weather, but I suppose when it was new it was white—with here and there the delicate blue or rose of a bird's breast feathers."

"It must have been beautiful," Brad said soberly. "Ned, look at her hair! It's long and soft and silky—not like the coarse black hair of the squaws."

They bent forward, looking in silence at the remnants of a woman's beauty which had persisted throughout the centuries. As Brad had said, the long black hair which streamed about the shoulders and far down over the robe was silkily soft and fine. The flesh had dried down upon the bones which were so delicate in skeletal structure that the effect was not gruesome, almost rather that of beauty.

The teeth were neither clenched nor gaping as had been the case with the other skulls they

had seen. They were slightly parted, as though the girl's last thoughts had been happy ones.*

"See how white and even they are," Brad whispered. "Perfect teeth, pearly and beautiful after all these years."

The opening in the burial mound faced the west and the splendor of the setting sun bathed the princess in a rosy glow. How many suns, Brad wondered, had shone upon that mound since she was placed there?

Centuries before Columbus took leave of his Spanish king and queen to set out on his voyage of discovery, this black-haired girl had been taking her rest. The Pilgrim Fathers had landed to bring the white man's customs and the white man's standards to Indian lands. America had thrown off England's yoke. Farther and farther into the desert had the adventurous trapper and hunter pushed his way until there came at last to stand before her partly uncovered

* A woman's skeleton similar to this is to be seen in the Historical Museum at Denver.

tomb a boy and a man from far-away Missouri.

“I suppose,” Ned said gravely, “that we are the first to look on her since they placed her there, weeping and wailing and gashing their arms with sharp flints to express their sorrow—a thousand years ago.”

A thousand years ago!

The glamorous phrase kept repeating itself in Brad's mind. Everything about them spoke of endless time: the rocks, the sands, the distant mountains, the stream back at the cottonwoods that rushed hurriedly to overtake the river. Yet time was not endless, nor was anything permanent, Brad thought. The clay in which the princess had been buried had been covered by sand and uncovered again. The mountains were being gradually worn down by the relentless whips of snow and rain and wind. The stream—who knew how long it had followed that course, how soon it would leave its shallow bed?

“A thousand years in Thy sight are as but

a day.” The echoes of a traveling preacher’s voice came back to Brad, bringing home to him, as never before had he realized in his heedless young life, the age of the whirling ball on which he lived and called it home.

Ned stood quietly, his own thoughts busy with this glimpse of eternity; unwilling to disturb the boy, knowing that his mental horizon was widening with every thought which came to him.

Perhaps it was to test this mental growth of Brad’s that Ned said to him after a while:

“ Well, boy, that’s a pretty important find, isn’t it? Shall we come back in the morning and remove the princess? We can load her quite easily onto one of the ponies. I imagine those scientists in Washington would be willing to pay us a considerable sum for her.”

The face Brad turned upon him was shocked and angry.

“ Ned Hundley, I wouldn’t think of such a thing! I’m surprised you’d even suggest it. Why—why—that’s her grave she’s in—

don't you realize it? That feather robe is really her shroud. Nothing would make me take the poor pretty thing away from where her folks put her when she died, and cart her around the country on a horse! ”

“ Glad you feel like that, Brad,” was the answer. “ I do myself. I just wanted to know how the idea struck you. Suppose we take our shovels and see what we can do toward making her resting-place safe again—safe from human eyes and from the sun and rain.”

They worked in silence, uncle and nephew; worked until the sun was nearly gone and the sudden dark threatened. They had some difficulty in finding their way back to their camp, but when they reached it, they were satisfied with the knowledge that for the time being at least, the black hair and pearly teeth of the princess were once more sealed in royal privacy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THEY returned to find the Fort in a bustle of activity. The train was scheduled to start in three days, and all was confusion and hurry within the adobe walls.

“ Time you were showing up here, young man! ” Bent accosted Brad. “ What in the name of reason have you got packed in those saddlebags? ”

Brad proudly exhibited his collection of primitive weapons and utensils, of bones and shells and tiny clay figures.

Good-naturedly the residents of the Fort dove into their stores and brought forth various treasures to add to it.

The richness of these contributions amazed and delighted Brad. Hardly a hunter or trapper but had picked up at various times objects which would have sent historian or

archeologist into spasms of delight. Teeth of prehistoric animals found on far-away glaciers, bones of birds unknown to modern man, petrified lizards and frogs, specimens of mineral ore and uncut and unpolished jewels, relics of a world long forgotten, found their way into the great boxes Bent kindly allowed the boy to pack for the wagon train.

“ Good thing you’re not paying your passage by the pound,” Ned grinned as he helped Brad carry down these heavy chests. “ Get everything in as soon as you can, old-timer. We’re nearly ready to start.”

As the hour of departure drew nearer, the activity within the Fort increased to feverish heat. All day long the blacksmith’s hammer rang, putting iron rims on wheels, hoops on casks and kegs, forging bars for the wagons, bits for new bridles. The carpenter and his assistants were making last-minute repairs to wagon bows and beds.

In the wagon-sheds, wheels were being wrenched off, thoroughly oiled, and put back again. The tar-bucket was in constant use.

Out in the corral, the oxen and mules were being inspected for sore feet or galled shoulders.

Brad was constantly in the way of the busy men, so interested was he in what was going on in every part of the Fort.

“Why are we taking so much food?” he demanded of Ned. “We can’t possibly eat it all, even if we’re four months on the way.”

“To trade with the Indians for skins,” the other answered briefly, his eyes on the list he was checking.

Dried buffalo meat, bacon, sugar in small kegs, tobacco, coffee, and a limited supply of whiskey were being stowed beneath the covers of the big Murphy wagons. Other things went in which Brad correctly surmised were also to be used in trade: small mirrors, calico in gaudy colors, glass beads, fofurraw of all kinds.

The hide-press was in use all the time, pressing into bales pelts which had come in at the last moment.

“Blamed Injuns start looking up their

winter's catch when they see the wagons brought out," grumbled the clerk, whose duties were increased a hundredfold by these belated contributions.

Bent went carefully over his stock, selecting all he could spare until the shelves were replenished by the returning train. Men who had reduced the task of packing a wagon—and it is a task far more difficult than can be imagined—to a fine art were too busy to look up from what they were doing.

Children toddled about underfoot, now and then getting a bare toe stepped on and adding their cries to the general uproar. The squaws hung around, their perpetual curiosity never satisfied, though the departure of the wagons was a yearly event. . . . And all day long, from the time the gates were opened in the morning until sunset barred them at night, the Indians streamed in.

They came to bring skins, held back until the final hour in hope of a better trade than had been offered them in the winter. They

came to beg odds and ends of the goods the packers handled. Above all, they came to interview Ned Hundley, in charge of the train, and sent through him messages to their relatives in the villages through which the wagons would pass.

Brad marveled at the patience with which Ned listened to these messages.

“You can’t remember half of them, let alone finding the Indians they are sent to,” he protested. “Why do you bother with them at all when you are so busy?”

“I’m never too busy to neglect important things, Brad. And anything that helps to keep our kindly relations with the Indians—especially those Indians along the trail who can protect or molest the train as it passes—is the most important job I have on hand.”

“But how can you keep from getting mixed up on what they tell you?”

“It isn’t so difficult as you might think. I know most of the chiefs to whom these messages are sent. I see them twice a year, coming and going, you know. And they aren’t

personal messages—like telling Cousin Sam back home that Pete Hardy of Weston wants to borrow his bear-trap next time he comes up that way, or asking Melissa Jones to save her pink quilt scraps to swap for Nance Dolin's blue ones at fair time. These are important dispatches of a political nature forwarded through that peerless diplomat, Edward Stone Hundley!" The owner of that name threw out his chest and grinned at Brad.

"What sort of dispatches? Tell me!"

"Can't. It would be against all the rules of diplomacy," the other declared. "But I'll tell you what Blue Horse of the South Cheyennes at Big Timbers wishes me to say to Laughing Cow of the Utes at Yellow Pine camp near Rushing River. 'He is sorry that he took away the squaw of his brother, Laughing Cow, and he will return her if the Utes will send somebody here to the Fort after her.'"

"You mean Blue Horse *stole* her?"

"Sure he stole her! The Utes and the Cheyennes were having a temporary—differ-

ence of opinion, shall we call it? and Blue Horse burned Laughing Cow's tepee, drove off his horses and made off with his wife. Now he's had enough of her—she keeps his lodge in an uproar all the time, he says, no matter how often he beats her—and anyway, now the Utes and Cheyennes are at peace, and he would give back to Laughing Cow what he stole.”

“ The horses, too? ”

“ Well, no. Blue Horse didn't mention those. I suppose they haven't objected to changing their tribe as strenuously as the squaw has.”

“ Will Laughing Cow take her back? ”

“ Maybe. Maybe not. Depends on how valuable she was to him. If she was a good beaver-skin dresser, or handy at beadwork and pottery-making, he'll probably be glad to recover her. If she wasn't—well, it'll just mean Bill Bent has one more Ute squaw on his hands to support, that's all.”

Bim Black came up with a grim smile on his face.

“ Say, Brad, thar’s a ’Rapahoe buck downstairs that ’lows he’ll trade his horse for yourn. Says he must have something extra ’cause his is the better animal, but he’ll treat you fair, bein’ as you’re kin to Ned here.”

“ Trade Greased Lightning? ” Brad was aghast. “ I think I see myself. You go tell him——”

“ Come on and have a look-see at what he’s offerin’ you,” Bim urged. “ You may change your mind after that.”

Muttering that it was not likely, but willing to inspect a horse which was so fine it rivalled Greased Lightning, Brad went down to the corral, Bim after him. Near one of the snubbing-posts an Indian stood, the frayed rope halter of a bay horse in his hand.

“ Thar it air,” said Bim. “ Fine animile, ain’t it? O’ course, it’s sort o’ knock-kneed, an’ its wind hev been broken, an’ suthin’ or ruther seems to have happened to one of its eyes. And it’s a little sway-back, and I suspicion that cough ain’t so promisin’. But outside of that, it’s a danged fine animile,

Brad, an' yore shorely lucky to trade yore Lightning for him."

"That—that broken-down wreck?" Brad gasped. "That heap of soap grease? That rack of bones that's barely moving around on its feet? Trade Lightning for that?" He fairly spluttered with rage. "Bim, you tell that 'Rapahoe——"

"Shet up, Brad," admonished the old man in high enjoyment. "He's going to do the talkin' hisself."

The Arapahoe drew himself up to his full height, pointed to the horse, and burst into a long and impassioned speech. Translated by the chuckling Bim, it meant that Three Feathers, the owner of this fine stallion, out of love for the whites and a desire to prove his generosity, would exchange the magnificent animal for the speedless, weak and diseased mount on which Brad must make his precarious way back to Missouri unless Three Feathers' charity was accepted. It was understood, of course, by his white brother, that Three Feathers must be compensated in some

measure for his unparalleled kindness. A trifle of gunpowder now, say three measures of the cup used by the agent, and much "chaws," and some sugar, and any odds and ends of fofurraw Brad could command.

The "trade" had attracted the attention of the loungers about the corral. They crowded around Brad, enjoying his fury at what he considered an insult to his beloved horse.

The dark face of the Arapahoe gave no sign that he realized the preposterousness of his offer. He continued to urge the spavined sorrel upon Brad until in disgust the boy turned on his heel and walked away. At the gate which led back to the court, he turned, to surprise the Indian doubled over in a fit of silent laughter. The sight did not increase Brad's good nature.

On the evening before the train started Carson rode in, bringing with him his tiny daughter Adelaide. It was the first knowledge Brad had had of the existence of the little girl.

“ Was her mother an Indian? ” he asked Ned curiously.

“ Yes. ‘ Alice,’ Kit always called her. He seldom speaks of her, but I believe they were very happy together. He’s taking Adelaide to Missouri to have her educated by the whites. Poor Kit! She’s the only family he has, and I know it’s hard for him to part with her.”

Brad managed to get a word alone with the scout.

“ How’s Blue? I kind of hoped he might be going with us to Independence.”

Carson shook his head, his eyes twinkling.

“ I told him he might, but he sort of figures Missouri ain’t so healthy for him right now. He run away, you know, same as I did, twelve years ago. I reckon that’s what gives me sort of a liking for the boy. Anyways, he’s going to stay at Taos till I get back, and then we’ll go out on the fall hunt together.”

It gave Brad a pang to think of those two, Carson and Blue, friends already despite the disparity of their ages, spending long weeks

in the pursuit of game while he, Brad, went about his peaceful and unexciting tasks at home. It put a sharper edge on the grief he felt at leaving the Fort.

The next morning he was startled to see, gathered outside the walls, a hundred or more braves in full regalia, sitting on their horses like bronze statues, evidently waiting for the train to start.

“What are they doing there?” he questioned Bent.

“They’re going with you—part of the way, that is. It gives them tremendous prestige with the tribes they visit to arrive in a wagon train. I’m sorry there are so many this time, though. That means Ned will be a long time on the way. Each party of visitors will be greeted with a dance and a feast, and Ned will not dare leave until he’s spent at least a day and a night in the village. He’ll know what’s best.”

“They add a lot to the looks of the train, though,” Brad said boyishly. “Look at the sun glitter on their lances and on all that

beadwork and shell ornaments and stuff on their clothes! ”

Bent nodded and smiled. Perhaps he, too, thought the magnificently arrayed redskins mounted on horses whose sides shone from recent rubbing added to the impressiveness of the long caravan.

“ Well, Brad,” he said, taking the boy’s hand in a hearty grasp, “ have you enjoyed your stay at Bent’s Fort? Are you sorry that unlucky shot of yours at Man Haw Ka’s elk sent you all the way down here to visit my ’dobe fortress on the plains? ”

Brad Hundley leaned forward for a last look at the place which had sheltered him for so many months. The roofs were bright with cactus bloom, some of them sown by the wind, some planted to keep intruders from crawling across the roofs. The whiteness of the walls almost blinded his eyes in the June sun. Along the battlements the patrols walked, stopping now and then to give a military salute to some one below.

Bim Black stood just within the gates, his

mutilated hand held up in friendly farewell to Brad. The Arapahoe buck who yesterday had vainly tried to trade his horse for Greased Lightning grinned amicably.

Through the open gates a motley array crowded: Mexicans, Indians, traders, dapper Frenchmen, uncouth mountaineers.

The shrill voice of Charlotte could be heard in perpetual admonishment of Andrew Green.

“Yo’, Andy! Whut yo’ done done wid ma gre’t iron stir-spoon? The onlee gre’t stir-spoon I got? Git it now, dam quick! Yo’ hear me!”

Rosalie, the half-breed, lounged lazily against the wall, her white teeth flashing in her dark face as she exchanged a final pleasantry with one of the drivers, regardless of her husband’s dark frown.

Out on the plain stood the wagons, four abreast, the line in front curving out of sight. Into one of them Carson was carefully putting his small half-breed daughter, Adelaide. Brad was glad that he would be for four

months in the company of this quiet-spoken, fearless, and powerful Indian scout.

He became aware that William Bent still awaited the answer to his question. Brad looked gratefully into the dark eyes on a level with his own.

“ It wasn’t an unlucky shot, sir! It was the luckiest I ever made, because it has given me the happiest and most interesting year of my life! ”

THE END

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